

# New Cultural Forms:

# 1

Artistic Narratives and Contemporary Expressions

Editor

Assoc. Prof. N. Müge SELÇUK



SELÇUK  
UNIVERSITY  
PRESS

# New Cultural Forms:

# 1

Artistic Narratives and Contemporary Expressions

Editor

Assoc. Prof. N. Müge SELÇUK



SELÇUK  
UNIVERSITY  
PRESS

# **NEW CULTURAL FORMS:**

**Artistic Narratives and Contemporary  
Expressions-1**

**Editor**

**Assoc. Prof. Dr. Müge SELÇUK**



## NEW CULTURAL FORMS: Artistic Narratives and Contemporary Expressions-1

December, 2025

**Editor:** Assoc. Prof. Dr. Mge Seluk

**ORCID:** 0000-0003-1696-1810

**Cover Design:** Emre ŐİMŐİR

**Selcuk University Press:** 2025

**ISBN(PDF):** 978-975-448-257-7

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.59726/SUPress/9789754482577>

**Keywords:** 1. Andy Warhol, 2. Shirin Neshat, 3. Marina Abramović, 4. Jenny Saville, 5. Sebastio Salgado, 6. Ai Weiwei

**Cite This:** Selcuk, M., (2025), New Cultural Forms: Artistic Narratives and Contemporary Expressions-1, Selcuk University Press.



Selcuk University Press in under the body of Scientific Publications Coordinatorship.

**Publisher:** Selcuk University Press

**Publisher Certification Number:** 43463

**Scientific Publications Coordinator:** Prof. Dr. Tuncer ACAR

**Address:** Seluk niversitesi Yayınları, Alaeddin Keykubat Yerleşkesi, Akademi mah. Yeni İstanbul Cad. No:369  
Posta Kodu: 42130, Seluklu-Konya/Trkiye

**Web:** [yayinevi.selcuk.edu.tr](http://yayinevi.selcuk.edu.tr)

**E-posta:** [yayinevi@selcuk.edu.tr](mailto:yayinevi@selcuk.edu.tr)

**Phone:** 0 (332) 241 00 41



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0). To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>



This license allows for copying any part of the work for personal use, not commercial use, providing author attribution is clearly stated.



## Editor's Biograph



### *Assoc. Prof. Dr. Müge SELÇUK*

Assoc. Prof. Dr. N. Müge Selçuk completed her proficiency in Art/PhD in art at Hacettepe University (Department Painting) in 2009-2013, Master's degree in Gazi University (Department of Graphics Education) in 2004-2009, and Bachelor's degree in Selçuk University (Department of Painting Education) in 1999-2003. She worked as a research assistant at Ankara Gazi University and Elazığ Fırat University

between 2003 and 2011. She was entitled to receive the title of Associate Professor in the field of Plastic Arts in 2022. She has been working as a faculty member at Eskişehir Osmangazi University, Faculty of Art and Design, Department of Visual Arts since 2014. In addition to the academic calendar, art productions; interdisciplinary, concept-oriented, space layouts are created. She prepares interdisciplinary, national and international exhibitions on concepts such as time, death, existence, developments in the social world and their rude absence.

For correspondence: [mugeselcuk80@gmail.com](mailto:mugeselcuk80@gmail.com)

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface .....	1
CHAPTER 1 Consumption Aesthetics and the Transformation of Art: An Analysis of Commodification through Pop Art and Andy Warhol.....	4
<i>Duygu ÇETİN</i>	
CHAPTER 2 Traces of Play in Shirin Neshat's Unveiling: A Reading Through Huizinga.....	24
<i>Engin DÜMLÜPINAR</i>	
CHAPTER 3 The Phenomenon of Violence in Marina Abramović's Performances: Pushing the Boundaries in Art .....	38
<i>Laçın Hazal KARADAĞ</i>	
CHAPTER 4 Reading Gender Issues in Jenny Saville's Paintings .....	72
<i>Funda SALT</i>	
CHAPTER 5 The Social Function of Art: Humanity and Responsibility in the Photographs of Sebastião Salgado.....	89
<i>Emre ŞİMŞİR</i>	
CHAPTER 6 The Contradictions in Ai Weiwei's Art Through Yin-Yang Philosophy.....	110
<i>Melih Can TOYGU</i>	

## Preface

*New Cultural Forms: Artistic Narratives and Contemporary Expressions–I* is an interdisciplinary study that explores the multilayered nature of contemporary art today. The book aims to reveal that artistic production is not only an aesthetic field of expression but also lies at the heart of social, cultural, and philosophical discussions. In this regard, it examines how art relates to consumer culture, social responsibility, gender, violence, play, and cultural dualities through various artists and theoretical perspectives. This publication is the result of more than a year of collective discussions, interdisciplinary collaboration, and intensive intellectual effort devoted to art. Each author contributes a distinctive viewpoint within their discipline, helping to reconsider the limits of cultural production in our time. This collaborative spirit emphasizes that art is a space of meaning-making both on an individual and collective level.

Throughout human history, art has served as a field through which individuals and societies construct, communicate, and transform their sense of reality. From cave paintings and ritualistic objects to architectural forms and literary narratives, artistic production has always functioned not only as an aesthetic manifestation but also as a dynamic mirror of beliefs, cultural structures, social relations, and power formations. In this long historical continuum, art has shaped both personal and collective memory, constantly reconfiguring how communities understand and narrate the world around them. The interdisciplinary nature of contemporary art today demands that we consider this historical continuity while also engaging with new concepts, expanded visual languages, and increasingly complex social contexts.

In the present era, artists are no longer solely creators of aesthetic forms; they have become catalysts of social transformation, cultural actors aligned with activism, and visible agents of critical thought. From ecological crises to political oppression, from struggles over gender and identity

to debates on migration and global inequality, many of the urgent issues of contemporary life are reinterpreted and made public through the expressive power of art. The transformative potential of contemporary artistic practices—pushing formal boundaries, questioning established perceptions, and generating new layers of meaning—has thus become more pronounced than ever. This book reflects that dynamic structure by examining the political, cultural, and ethical responsibilities that contemporary art now undertakes, bringing together contributions from various disciplines to illuminate art’s multifaceted, critical, and transformative force.

The chapters in this volume present in-depth readings that engage with diverse aspects of contemporary artistic production:

- Duygu Çetin, in “Consumption Aesthetics and the Transformation of Art: An Analysis of Commodification through Pop Art and Andy Warhol,” analyzes the aesthetic of commodification through the works of Andy Warhol.
- Engin Dumlupınar, in “Traces of Play in Shirin Neshat’s *Unveiling: A Reading Through Huizinga*,” interprets Neshat’s art through the concept of play, offering a new perspective on identity and artistic expression.
- Laçın Hazal Karadağ, in “The Phenomenon of Violence in Marina Abramović’s Performances: Pushing the Boundaries in Art,” explores the limits of violence and the body in Abramović’s performance art.
- Funda Salt, in “Reading Gender Issues in Jenny Saville’s Paintings,” discusses the transformation of gender representation and the visibility of the female body in Saville’s work.
- Emre Şimşir, in “The Social Function of Art: Humanity and Responsibility in the Photographs of Sebastião Salgado,” examines Salgado’s photographs



through the lenses of ethics, humanity, and social responsibility.

- Melih Can Toygu, in “The Contradiction in Ai Weiwei’s Art and the Cultural Approach through Yin–Yang Philosophy,” interprets the contradictions within Ai Weiwei’s art through the yin–yang philosophy, reflecting on the intersections of Eastern and Western cultures.

Together, these studies reveal the political, aesthetic, and ethical dimensions of contemporary art. Read collectively, they demonstrate that art is not only a formal endeavor but also an intellectual, critical, and transformative force—one that continues to shape and challenge our understanding of the world.

*Assoc. Prof. Dr. Müge SELÇUK*

# **CHAPTER 1**

## **Consumption Aesthetics and the Transformation of Art: An Analysis of Commodification through Pop Art and Andy Warhol**

Duygu ÇETİN

### **Introduction**

Throughout history, art has been continuously shaped by social, cultural, and economic dynamics, functioning in each era as an aesthetic articulation of the spirit of its time. In the modern world, the rapidly transforming culture of consumption has influenced not only individuals' lifestyles and societal values but also the modes through which art is produced and interpreted. The 1960s represented a period of significant upheaval, characterized by various cultural, political, and economic transformations on a global scale. Following the Second World War, Western economies experienced rapid growth, leading to an increase in prosperity. With the advancement of industrialization, mass production techniques have rendered goods more affordable and accessible.

Consumption is typically defined as the fulfillment of needs; however, it transcends a purely economic phenomenon. It is also a social phenomenon influenced by the social and cultural values embraced by various countries and societies, evolving in accordance with the conditions of the era. Currently, consumption is shaped by both economic factors and socio-cultural dynamics. Individuals' desires, pleasures, status, and identities are manifested in their consumption choices (İlter, 2019). In a consumer society, the line between real and false needs is becoming blurred. People believe that acquiring consumer goods gives them social status. As a result, individuals feel both socially distinct and yet fully integrated into consumer society. Therefore, the consumer society functions as a structure that both generates and manages individual desires and needs (Baudrillard, 2013). Relatedly, the culture industry turns culture from an intellectual and artistic pursuit into a standardized, commercialized, mass-produced field (Adorno, 2011). Mass media and the culture industry, which emerged and proliferated in the 1960s, also demonstrated their impact in the realm of art. While consumer culture has positioned art as a critical tool, it has simultaneously integrated it into daily life, rendering it an object of consumption (Gürdal, 2018). The culture industry treats art like other

cultural products: it standardizes, commercializes, and reduces art to consumable formats. This process, called the commodification of art, strips works of their aesthetic and critical qualities, turning them into commodities produced according to market demands. Consequently, art loses its autonomy and becomes a product tailored to market expectations (Adorno, 2011).

In this context, the Pop Art movement that emerged in the mid-20th century occupied a significant position at the intersection of consumer culture and art. Andy Warhol, one of the leading representatives of Pop Art, redefined the boundaries and function of art by presenting the icons and everyday objects of consumer society as artistic means of expression. In this chapter, Andy Warhol will be examined within the context of consumer culture, and the effects of the commercialization and commodification of art on contemporary art will be presented.

### **Consumer Culture**

The 20th century was a period marked by massive wars, upheavals, and economic crises across the globe. These wars left profound psychological effects on people. Özdemiroğlu (2001) categorizes the individual state of mind in the 1950s under five main headings: powerlessness, meaninglessness, lawlessness, isolation, and alienation from oneself. The devastating effects of the Second World War created pessimism and uncertainty about the future in individuals. The 1960s constituted a significant turning point in social history, marked by dynamics such as social transformation, economic growth, urbanization, and class mobility. During this period, the influence of the American lifestyle on Western societies increased, and a common cultural structure began to take shape on a global scale (Bayraktar, 2004, pp. 86-90).

Industrialization, which began in England in the 18th century, gained momentum in the 19th and 20th centuries, spreading throughout the world and becoming the main ideology of science, culture, and art (Şahin, 2021, p.1809). After the Second World War, rapid developments in industry and technology led to mechanized systems replacing production based on manual labor. With the invention of the steam engine, mass production techniques became widespread, and increased production capacity led society towards more consumption (Sevilay, 2020, p.73). Mass production has necessitated mass consumption, leading to the systematic imposition of the phenomenon of consumption on society (İşmal Atar & Avcı,

2018, p. 90). Modernism, shaped by the Enlightenment, paved the way for the rise of the capitalist system over time. This process led to the emergence of consumer culture (Şahin, 2021, p.1807). With the rise of capitalism, the basic needs-oriented approach to production and consumption has transformed into a consumption mindset shaped by the pursuit of social identity construction and prestigious lifestyles (Sevilay, 2020, p.71).

Rapidly increasing economic prosperity has led to the emergence of a new type of individual who is distant from traditional values and focused on consumption (Tunç, 2003, p.114). Individuals have begun to construct their identities through the objects they own and consume; human relationships have also been shaped on this basis. In this context, consumption has become an integral part of identity formation, and consumption practices have turned into cultural values carrying symbolic meanings (Mutlu, 2021, p.44).

The widespread use of mass media has led Pop Art artists to become part of a consumer society, regardless of socio-economic conditions (Tunç, 2003, p.115). Media such as television, cinema, radio, and magazines have encouraged unlimited consumption based on desire by changing individuals' perceptions of needs (Mutlu, 2021, p.49; Bayraktar, 2004, p.111). For example, the spread of television in the 1960s enabled brands and products to reach large audiences rapidly (Yıldırım, 2020).

As consumption becomes a culture, needs become artificial and widespread in society. Within the culture of consumption, everything related to human life is transformed into objects of consumption through capitalist relations. This situation leads to values, beliefs, identities, and institutions becoming subjects of consumption. The culture of consumption, which has become widespread with the process of globalization, also brings with it the consumption of culture itself (Baudrillard, 2013).

Consumer culture has led individuals to define their social roles and statuses through the products they consume. The notion of buy, own, be happy has become a social norm. Consumer culture has also influenced art and culture (Elmasoğlu, 2017). Pop Art, in particular, has become a movement that both criticizes and supports this culture by placing consumer goods and popular images at the center of art. Consumer culture is a phenomenon in modern capitalist societies where individuals define their identities and statuses through the products they consume. In this context, art has begun to be seen not only as an aesthetic or philosophical production, but also



as a marketing and consumption tool. For example, works of art are now reproducible and mass-producible rather than unique. Advertisements, brands, and popular culture icons have become part of works of art.

### **Andy Warhol and the Discourse of Popular Art**

Pop Art is an art movement that emerged in the mid-20th century and transformed popular culture into an artistic form of expression. The name of this movement, which is based on popular culture, was first used by British art critic Lawrence Alloway in his 1958 article *The Arts and the Mass Media*, published in Architectural Design magazine, to describe products of popular culture (Antmen, 2008, p.160). However, the term *Pop* first appeared in Richard Hamilton's collage at the exhibition *This is Tomorrow*, organized by The Independent Group in London in 1956 (Hodge, 2013, p.169).

Pop Art is more than just an artistic movement; it is a discourse that expresses the social and cultural dynamics of the period (Yavuz, 2007). Pop Art artists artistically reinterpreted ordinary objects from daily life on two-dimensional surfaces. This movement emphasized that art was not exclusive to the elite but was also integrated into mass consumer culture, thereby dismantling the distinction between *high culture*, directed at the elite, and the cultural consumption practices of the broader public (Antmen, 2008, p.162). In 1957, Richard Hamilton described this emerging movement in art as “popular, transient, expendable, low cost, mass produced, young, witty, sexy, gimmicky, glamorous, and big business.” (Hodge, 2013, p.169). British and American Pop Art artists such as Richard Hamilton, Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Roy Lichtenstein, Eduardo Paolozzi, Tom Wesselmann, James Rosenquist, and Jim Dine produced works that emphasized experimentation (Büyükişleyen & Özsezgin, 1993; Mutlu, 2021; Tunç, 2003). With Pop Art, artworks ceased to be unique and singular, becoming part of mass production. While consumer objects were transformed into artworks, art itself became an object of consumption. Icons of popular culture became the symbols of the consumer society.

Pop Art, by rendering the consumer society visible through art, revealed both the superficiality and the allure of consumption. In this context, Pop Art is not merely an art movement but also a sociological and cultural phenomenon (Tunç, 2003). The works and production process of Andy Warhol hold a significant place in

understanding the relationship between Pop Art and consumer culture.

Andy Warhol studied commercial art and pictorial design at the Carnegie Institute of Technology. After graduating from art school, he moved to New York in 1949 to work as a magazine and advertising illustrator. Upon his arrival in New York, he began producing advertising illustrations. His works were first published in 1949 in an issue of Glamour magazine, where he illustrated a story titled *What is Success?* (Figure 1) (Image Amplified, n.d.).

**Figure 1.** Andy Warhol, *Success Is a Job in New York*, Glamour Magazine, 1949, illustration, 31.1 x 22.5 cm, The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh<sup>1</sup>



Throughout the 1950s, he was recognized as one of the leading illustrators of the period and received numerous awards. He collaborated with prestigious brands and publishing houses such as Tiffany & Co., Vogue, The New York Times, I. Miller Shoes (Figure 2), Fleming-Joffe, and Columbia Records (Image Amplified, n.d.).

<sup>1</sup> The figure used is subject to copyright and is included solely for academic study and critical purposes as an illustrative example.

**Figure 2.** Andy Warhol, *À la recherche du shoe perdu, I. Miller Shoes*, 1955, illustration, 24.7 x 34.8 cm, The Museum of Modern Art, New York<sup>2</sup>



The 1950s are regarded as a preparatory phase for Andy Warhol's artistic production. In 1960, the artist turned to Pop Art by placing commercial product images at the center of his works; however, he had not yet fully developed his distinctive artistic language during this period. One of the early examples of this process, *Coca-Cola* (1960), focuses on the Coca-Cola bottle and logo, enlarging the image in a way that evokes the impression of being cut and pasted from an advertisement. Nevertheless, this work did not achieve the effect Warhol desired. Similarly, *Water Heater* (1961), inspired by a newspaper advertisement, represents another instance in which the artist was exploring his formal and conceptual orientations. These two works laid the groundwork for Warhol's discovery of the unique mode of expression that would later generate significant attention (Gürdal, 2018, p. 314).

In the 1960s, he made a significant change in his style by shifting from commercial illustration to plastic art. During this period, he produced works that pushed his individual identity and technical skills into the background. Combining everyday life with artistic production, Warhol created his unique Warhol style by giving more space to symbolism and commercial values in his works. These works coincide with the dominant consumer culture of the period and clearly reflect the artist's approach.

---

<sup>2</sup> The figure used is subject to copyright and is included solely for academic study and critical purposes as an illustrative example.

Known as the Silver Factory, Andy Warhol's atelier was a studio and cultural center operating in New York in the early 1960s and 70s. It quickly became a meeting place for various artists, musicians, actors, writers, and other creative individuals. The Factory stood out not only for its collaborative atmosphere but also for its use of unconventional materials and techniques. Warhol and his collaborators used a wide range of media, including painting, photography, film, and sculpture, to create works that challenged traditional notions of art and beauty. One of the Factory's most distinctive features was its use of mass-produced and everyday objects as artistic materials. Warhol was particularly interested in consumer culture and its intersection with art, frequently incorporating images of commercial products, celebrities, and other pop culture icons into his work (Masterworks Fine Art, n.d.a).

Among the most famous Factory Prints is Campbell's soup cans series (Figure 3), which features multiple prints of the iconic soup can design in various colors and sizes. The artist once explained his preference for the silkscreen technique by citing its speed and 'machine-like' nature. "I find silkscreen printing easier to use. This way, I don't have to work on my objects at all. One of my assistants or anyone else, for that matter, can reproduce the design as well as I could", he said (Frigeri, 2019).

**Figure 3.** Andy Warhol, *Campbell's Soup Cans*, 1962, synthetic polymer paint and pencil on thirty-two canvases, 50.8 x 40.6 cm, The Museum of Modern Art, New York<sup>3</sup>



---

<sup>3</sup> The figure used is subject to copyright and is included solely for academic study and critical purposes as an illustrative example.



The advancement of technology and the emergence of mass production techniques directly influenced Warhol's art. Warhol associated the machine-like replication of products commonly encountered in everyday life with the repetition of everyday life (Ünsal, 2018).

Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* (Figure 4), which focus on consumer objects and draw attention with their realism, sparked debates during the period they were exhibited as to whether they glorified or criticized consumer culture. Warhol's statement, reflecting the spirit of the times that making money is an art, parallels the references he used in producing his artwork (Atar & Avcı, 2018). The abundance of Brillo boxes, as if there were more outside this gallery, implies the abundance of mass production (Norton Simon Museum, n.d.). Choosing a brand that is a product of popular culture for Andy Warhol is related to its accessibility as an everyday object. However, the act of painting wooden boxes in the form of a readymade transforms it into an artist's product (Ünsal, 2018).

**Figure 4.** Andy Warhol, *Brillo Boxes*, 1964, silkscreen print, 43.2 x 43.2 x 35.6 cm, The Museum of Modern Art, New York<sup>4</sup>



Factory prints, as an important element of Warhol's legacy, have reinforced his position as one of the most influential artists of the 20th century. They have also played a significant role in the development of the contemporary art market by contributing to the acceptance of the idea of limited edition prints as a valuable and collectible art form. Other significant Factory prints include

---

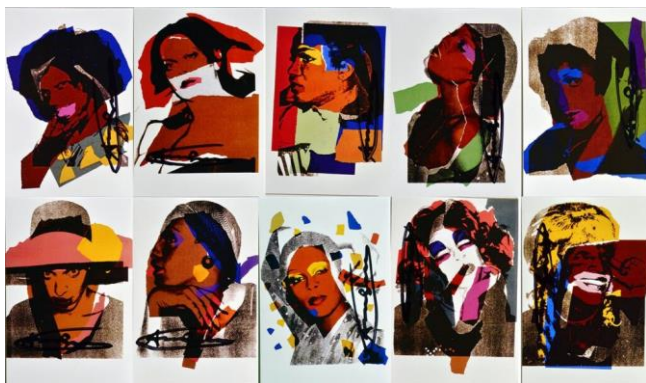
<sup>4</sup> The figure used is subject to copyright and is included solely for academic study and critical purposes as an illustrative example.

depictions of famous figures of the era, such as Chinese communist leader Mao Zedong, Elvis Presley, and Marilyn Monroe, as well as prints depicting the moments before and after the assassination of Jacqueline Kennedy, the wife of US President John F. Kennedy. These prints were produced in a quantity of nearly 250, signed and numbered by Warhol himself, making them highly valuable to collectors and enthusiasts (Masterworks Fine Art, n.d.a).

The number of Warhol's prints has not diminished his importance in the art market. The artist's brand value and the high prices his works fetch have outweighed concerns that the number of copies would undermine their originality. Pop Art, or commercial art, is based on illustrations, labels, packaging designs, and posters. In this context, it glorifies consumer society through ordinary and everyday objects (Danto, 2010, as cited in Atar & Avci, 2018, p. 101).

The 1970s were a period in the United States when liberal values rose and LGBTQ+ communities began to express their sexuality more openly in public spaces. This atmosphere inspired Andy Warhol to create a series of 10 silkscreen prints titled *Ladies and Gentlemen* in 1975 (Figure 5). The Ladies and Gentlemen series is a work that includes portraits of communities of drag queens and transgender individuals. Warhol selected his models for this series primarily from a nightclub in Manhattan and painted these individuals, most of whom were black American and of Latin transgender, from Polaroid photographs. The series was commissioned by Italian art dealer Luciano Anselmino and was first exhibited in Italy at the Palazzo dei Diamanti in 1975 (Masterworks Fine Art, n.d.b). Warhol's work brought issues of identity and visibility to the forefront through art, giving visibility to marginalized identities while also shifting the focus of portraiture away from famous figures and toward anonymous individuals.

**Figure 5.** Andy Warhol, *Ladies and Gentlemen*, 1975, silkscreen print, 110.5 x 72.3 cm, Italian private collection<sup>5</sup>



### **The Art of Andy Warhol in the Post-1980s Period**

Warhol faced harsh criticism in the 1980s for focusing too much on the commercial aspects of art. The exhibition *Ten Portraits of Jews of the Twentieth Century* at the Jewish Museum in New York was heavily criticized by critics. They accused Warhol of exploiting his subjects without respect for Judaism or Jews. However, today, Warhol's work from the 1980s is generally regarded as his greatest genius, with many writers and critics describing it as *the best reflection of our times* (Revolver Gallery, n.d.a).

Andy Warhol was known for creating commissioned portraits of celebrities, social elites, and business leaders, particularly in the 1970s and 80s. These portraits were an important area of activity that reflected both his artistic identity and his commercial acumen. In these works, he would take a series of photographs of the model using a Polaroid camera, then apply silkscreen and painting techniques to these images. This process was a systematic form of production that aligned with his ideal of being an artist who worked *like a machine*.

During the 1980s, he produced approximately 50 portraits a year, earning between \$25,000 and \$40,000 for each. These earnings were crucial for Warhol to finance his other artistic projects (Guy Hepner, 2025).

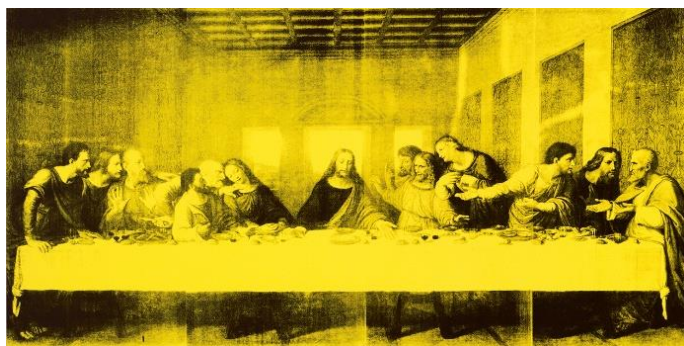
---

<sup>5</sup> The figure used is subject to copyright and is included solely for academic study and critical purposes as an illustrative example.

In the mid-1980s, Warhol collaborated on artworks with young artists such as Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring. Warhol and Basquiat produced more than 150 collaborative works over a period of four years (Binswanger, 2024). This collaboration brought together Warhol's commercial images with Basquiat's energetic and childlike lines. Their works often explored themes such as capitalism, power, race, and fame. While Basquiat faced criticism for being overshadowed by Warhol, Warhol drew inspiration from the young artist's energy and originality. After the *Warhol/Basquiat* Paintings exhibition in 1985, the relationship between the two deteriorated, and Basquiat ended the partnership.

Warhol completed his *Sixty Last Suppers* series in 1986, and this series was his last major project before his death. This work consists of 60 identical silkscreen images of Leonardo da Vinci's famous fresco *The Last Supper* (Figure 6). In this series, Warhol questioned the relationship between death, sanctity, faith, and consumer culture. The scale of the painting and the repeated images imply a critique of the commercialization and commodification of sacred symbols (Revolver Gallery, n.d.b).

**Figure 6.** Andy Warhol, *The Last Supper*, 1986, silkscreen print, 302.9 x 668.7 cm, The Museum of Modern Art, New York<sup>6</sup>



Warhol expressed his views on art as follows:

Business art is the step that comes after Art. I started as a commercial artist, and I want to finish as a business artist. After I did the thing called *art* or whatever it's called, I went into business art. I wanted to be an Art Businessman or a

---

<sup>6</sup> The figure used is subject to copyright and is included solely for academic study and critical purposes as an illustrative example.

Business Artist. Being good in business is the most fascinating kind of art. During the hippie era people put down the idea of business they'd say, *Money is bad*, and *Working is bad*, but making money is art and working is art and good business is the best art (Warhol, 1989, p. 459).

From Warhol's statement, it can be concluded that art can be seen not only as an aesthetic pursuit but also as a field intertwined with commerce. By highlighting the relationship between art and the economy, Warhol articulated an artistic approach that integrated the creative process with market dynamics. This approach legitimizes the perception of art as a commodity while arguing that commercial success can be part of artistic value. In this context, Warhol used the values of modern consumer society as a means of artistic expression.

### **Art under the Influence of Contemporary Consumer Culture**

As of 2024, the world population has been recorded as 8 billion 73 million 859 thousand 407 people. According to data from Population Today, an online statistics platform that provides real-time demographic data on the world population, the current world population is 8,232,387,801, with an annual growth rate of 0.836% (Population Today, n.d.). The increase in the world population significantly affects the demographic structure, consumption habits, and the economic system.

According to the report titled *2024 Mid-Year Consumer Outlook: Guide to 2025* published by Nielsen IQ, global consumer spending is expected to increase by approximately \$3.2 trillion to reach \$60 trillion by the end of 2025 (Fernandes, 2024). These data reveal that population growth and consumption habits are undergoing a significant transformation process on a global scale.

Today, rapidly advancing technology is affecting the perception of time and social structure. The diversity of communication tools brings with it constant change in cultural codes and values. Values such as production-consumption relationships, family, and cultural ties found in traditional societies have begun to dissolve in the present day. This process has accelerated due to the impact of economic mobility and the global market economy. This transformation has given rise to a lifestyle in which individuals focus on material values (Mutlu, 2021).

The market, which has become the defining element of capitalist culture and art, has transformed *high* art culture into a

culture of pleasure presented with a hedonistic approach. Leading critics of the modern era, such as Walter Pater, Roger Fry, and Clement Greenberg, may have fought against the commercialization and corruption of art; however, capitalism's liberal, economy-based approach imposed its commercial interests and aesthetic tastes on art, commodifying it and incorporating artists into the system (Şahin, 2021). The commodification of artworks is a situation that limits the autonomy of art. Artists who prioritize profit in a competitive environment often compromise their freedom. These economic expectations also shape the artist's processes of creating and sharing their art. The prioritization of which subject or style will generate more money trivializes art and diminishes its value (Samsun, 2015). Works of art have become tools that serve the dynamics of the market, produced to appeal to the tastes of the masses, devoid of context, free from questioning, and built on fleeting pleasures (Mutlu, 2021). According to Adorno, art should serve as a tool that critiques and questions the existing cultural and social dynamics. When art loses this critical aspect, it has a profound impact on the development of society. Adorno and Horkheimer argue that the culture industry weakens critical thinking skills and renders individuals passive in the face of social order (Göktepeliler & Küpeli, 2024).

In his book *The End of Art*, Kuspit questions capitalism and the commercialization of art. In a world where art has become money, what is real art? Who is a real artist, assuming there is any reality beyond the commercial reality of art? (Kuspit, 2006, p.168)

Biennials, galleries, museums, and art fairs, which play a significant role in the proliferation of contemporary art and the purchase of artworks, accelerate the commercialization process of artworks by establishing a symbiotic relationship with each other. Contemporary art collecting has become not only a profitable property category with economic value, but also an attractive form of consumption preferred by the wealthy due to the prestige and status it provides (Bayrak, 2013).

In contemporary society, art is perceived as an aesthetic value as well as an investment vehicle and a marker of prestige. The pursuit of owning artworks or supporting artists reflects a long-standing process that has continued since the emergence of the bourgeoisie. Today, engaging with art and artists is accepted as a sign of social status and prestige. For this reason, we see an increase in the financial

value of art, a rise in environments where artists are supported, and art gaining importance as an investment vehicle (Mutlu, 2021).

Many contemporary artists who take a critical approach to today's consumer society question the commodification, erosion of identity, and pursuit of superficial pleasures imposed by capitalism in their works. Banksy produces political and social messages criticizing social injustices and consumer culture through street art, using dark humor and irony (Baranseli, 2017); Barbara Kruger combines text and visuals to present an ironic form of expression against the linguistic and visual codes imposed by consumer society (Çulha, 2019). Damien Hirst's installations, reminiscent of shop window displays, reveal the fetishizing effect of consumer culture on objects, while Ai Weiwei, through his works created from ready-made objects and waste materials, questions both the production-consumption cycle and the individual's place in society in the face of authoritarian structures.

These approaches highlight both the role of art in generating aesthetic enjoyment and its capacity to foster social critique and awareness. Thus, art is no longer an elevated field catering only to an elite audience but has become a form of expression intertwined with everyday life, drawing inspiration from ordinary objects and contemporary social realities. This transformation of art signals a radical change both in its modes of production and in its relationship with the audience.

One striking example of commodified art is Jeff Koons' *Balloon Dog* series, created from brightly colored stainless steel, known for his practice of transforming everyday objects into art objects; this work has become an iconic figure symbolizing the commodification of art. One of these works set a record in 2013 when it sold for \$58.4 million at auction, becoming the most expensive work sold at auction by a living artist.

Contemporary artist Tom Friedman creates works using everyday objects such as toothpicks, soap, sugar, gum, and pencils (Sevilay, 2019, p.47). Although Friedman's works are formally impressive in their complexity, there is often a specific conceptual reference behind these structures. It is also noteworthy that most of his works are untitled. The artist's 1995 installation *Untitled (Toothpicks)* is a three-dimensional form resembling a starburst, created by carefully assembling approximately 30,000 toothpicks. This work stands out both for the ordinariness of the material

employed and for the labor- and time-intensive nature of its production process.

Claes Oldenburg has turned to unconventional materials in sculpture, recreating everyday consumer objects such as needles, buttons, clothespins, and spoons on monumental scales, thereby expanding the boundaries between art and everyday life. By conferring aesthetic and conceptual status upon ordinary objects, the artist has questioned the hierarchical distinction between high art and objects belonging to mass consumer culture, thereby challenging established notions of the definition of an art object (Huntürk, 2016). Oldenburg created a 14-meter-high sculpture in the shape of a clothespin in 1976, which became one of the symbolic structures of the city of Philadelphia (Sevilay, 2019, p.25). The artist, who adopts a humorous narrative style, approaches the social problems created by consumer culture from a critical perspective, making these problems visible through an ironic language (Dede, 2015, p.25).

## **Conclusion**

This study examines Pop Art and Andy Warhol's works within the context of consumer culture and reveals the relationship between today's consumer culture and the commodification of artworks.

Andy Warhol's approach to bringing popular images into art has pioneered the incorporation of advertisements, brands, and pop culture icons into art today. Contemporary art, influenced by consumer culture, has the opportunity to reach a broad audience but also faces the risk of losing depth and critical perspective. Art is intertwined with the dynamics of consumer society, both as a product and an experience. Consumer culture has caused art to become an object of *instant gratification* rather than an experience. Artworks are now seen as financial investment vehicles as much as for their aesthetic or philosophical value. According to Adorno, in modern capitalist society, art has become part of cultural production processes and has lost its aesthetic originality and critical potential in this process. For Adorno, the commercialization of art is a result of the capitalist system, and this process reduces art to a consumption object by severing it from its critical function.

The transformation of art into an economic tool and the convergence of numerous parameters that facilitate the formation of art markets have led to significant changes in the purpose and position of art. Companies, collectors, artists, and artworks shape the



art market. Today, the value of an artwork is determined not by concepts such as the meaning or creativity it carries, but rather by its sale price and the prestige of the venue where the sale takes place (Mutlu, 2021). The commercial dimension of art has gained acceptance in today's art world and has become one of the fundamental criteria for artistic success. Art and artworks are valued not only for their aesthetic value but also for their economic value as commercial commodities. This transformation has caused art to move away from its original nature and evolve into a field dominated by marketing strategies and market dynamics.

In the after Warhol era, as seen particularly in artists such as Jeff Koons, the artist is not only a producer of aesthetic objects but also a strategic actor who manages their own image and art as a global brand. This new type of artist has abandoned the *uniqueness* of art by combining the production process with industrial methods. Thus, the artwork has become a status symbol displayed in the same vitrine as luxury consumer goods.

As a result, this process, which began with Andy Warhol and transcended the boundaries of Pop Art to influence contemporary art, has left the autonomy of art vulnerable to market dynamics. Consumer culture has transformed art into a spectacle shaped by market expectations. While this limits art's critical power, it forces both the artist and the viewer to confront the reality of the consumer society in which they live.

## References

- Adorno, T. W. (2011). *Kültür Endüstrisi Kültür Yönetimi. [Cultural Industry Cultural Management]* İletişim Yayıncılık.
- Antmen, A. (2008). *20. Yüzyıl Batı Sanat Akımları. [20th Century Western Art Movements]* Sel Yayıncılık.
- Atar, N. İ. & Avcı, S. (2018). Tüketim kültüründe sanatın tüketim nesnesi olarak sunumu. [The presentation of an artistic production as a consumable item in the consumption culture] *Art-e Sanat Dergisi*, 11(21), 90-114.
- Baranseli, E. S. (2017). Bir protesto aracı olarak sanat, yeni medya etkisi ve Banksy örneği. [Art as a protest medium, new media effect and the Banksy case] *Inonu University Journal of Art and Design*, 7(16), 264-280.

- Baudrillard, J. (2013). *Tüketim toplumu-söylenceleri/yapıları*. [The consumer society: myths and structures] (H. Deliceçaylı & F. Keskin, Trans.). Ayrıntı Yayınları.
- Binswanger, J. (2024, April 2). The Art World is Reevaluating Andy Warhol and Jean-Michel Basquiat's Controversial Partnership. Smithsonian Magazine. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/a-unique-basquiat-and-warhol-collaboration-could-sell-for-18-million-180984065/>
- Büyükişleyen, M. Z. & Özsezgin, K. (1993). *Sanat eserlerini inceleme*. [Examining works of art] Açıköğretim Fakültesi Yayınları.
- Çulha, D. (2019). Barbara Kruger'in tasarımlarını göstergelerarasılığın yeniden üretim yöntemleriyle okumak. [Reading Barbara Kruger's designs using reproduction methods of intersemiotics perspective] *IBAD Journal of Social Sciences*, 38-52.
- Dede, E. (2015). 1960 sonrası tüketim kültürünün sanata yansımaları. [Reflections of consumer culture in art after 1960] *Dokuz Eylül University Journal of Humanities*, 3(4), 17-45.
- Elmasoğlu, K. (2017). Tüketim kültüründe etkili bir araç olarak reklamın işlevlerine dair genel bir değerlendirme. [A general evaluation of advertising functions as an effective tool in consumer culture] *Abant Kültürel Araştırmalar Dergisi*, 2(4), 27-42.
- Fernandes, L. (2024). *Mid-Year consumer outlook: guide to 2025*. NielsenIQ. <https://nielseniq.com/global/en/insights/report/2024/mid-year-consumer-outlook-guide-to-2025/>
- Frigeri, F. (2019). *Pop sanat*. [Pop art] Hep Kitap.
- Göktepeliler, Ö. & Küpeli, A. E. (2024). Sanatın ticarileşmesi: Adorno'nun kültür endüstrisi üzerine görüşleri. [The commercialization of art: Adorno's views on the culture industry] *International Journal of Art and Aesthetics*, 7(14), 214-226
- Gürdal, N. (2018). Sanat alanında Andy Warhol hadisesi [Andy Warhol incident in the art scene] *Art-Sanat Dergisi*, (9), 311-321.

- Hodge, S. (2013). *Gerçekten bilmeniz gereken 50 sanat fikri. [50 Art ideas you really need to know]* (E. Gözgü, Trans.). Domingo Yayıncılık.
- Huntürk, Ö. (2016). *Heykel ve sanat kuramları. [Sculpture and art theories]* Hayalperest Yayınları.
- Image Amplified. (n.d.). *The relevant queer: Artist, Filmmaker & Producer Andy Warhol.* <https://imageamplified.com/the-relevant-queer-artist-filmmaker-producer-andy-warhol-born-august-6-1928-3/>
- İlter, E. (2019). Tüketim kültürünün tarihsel gelişim süreci ve bireysel, toplumsal ve kültürel etkilerinin incelenmesi. [Historical development process of consumption culture and investigation of individual, social and cultural effects] *Erzincan University Journal of Social Sciences Institute*, 12(2), 461-476.
- Kuspit, D. (2006). *Sanatın sonu. [The end of art]* (Y. Tezgiden, Trans.). Metis Yayınları.
- Guy Hepner. (2025, May 2). *Andy Warhol Portraits: A Complete Guide.* [https://guyhepner.com/news/393-andy-warhol-portraits-a-complete-guide/?srsltid=AfmBOoplw9uzPFNOPXkVgrThypk6xcX\\_\\_V2MnnqftqxhYxN9WJcS2Zg](https://guyhepner.com/news/393-andy-warhol-portraits-a-complete-guide/?srsltid=AfmBOoplw9uzPFNOPXkVgrThypk6xcX__V2MnnqftqxhYxN9WJcS2Zg)
- Masterworks Fine Art. (n.d.a). *Andy Warhol's "The Factory" Biography.* <https://www.masterworksfineart.com/bio/andy-warhols-the-factory>
- Masterworks Fine Art. (n.d.b). *Andy Warhol Ladies and Gentlemen Series, 1975.* <https://www.masterworksfineart.com/artists/andy-warhol/ladies-and-gentlemen-series-1975?srsltid=AfmBOoqBTsJE8n8QY0CcCDtHWL1sg3hj6zt65MQ11S-4YuNkUI45XGAH>
- Mutlu, E. (2021). *Tüketim kültürü ve tüketim kültürünün güncel sanat pratiklerine yansımaları [Consumption culture and its reflection on the current art practices]* (Doctoral dissertation, Kastamonu University). YÖK Tez Merkezi.
- Nortonsimonmuesum. (n.d.). *Brillo Boxes.* <https://www.nortonsimon.org/art/detail/P.1969.144.001-100/>
- Population Today. (n.d.). *World Population Chart.* <https://populationtoday.com/>

- Revolver Gallery. (n.d.a). *Andy Warhol 1980s*  
<https://revolverwarholgallery.com/warhol-originals-andy-warhol-collection/andy-warhol-80s/>
- Revolver Gallery. (n.d.b). *Top 20 Andy Warhol Paintings*.  
<https://revolverwarholgallery.com/top-20-andy-warhol-paintings/>
- Samsun, M. (2015). Kapitalist bir söylem olarak sanatın sonu. [The end of art as a capitalist discourse] *International Journal of Human Sciences*, 12(2), 1240-1243.
- Sevilay, M.E. (2019). *Tüketim toplumunda yeni sanat pratikleri* [New art practices in the consumer society] (Master's thesis, Gazi University). YÖK Tez Merkezi.
- Şahin, H. (2021). Tüketim kültürü bağlamında sanatın metalaşması. [Commercialization of art in the context of consumption culture] *Idil Journal of Art and Language*, 10(88), 1807-1820.
- Tunç, A. Z. (2003). Tüketici toplumun sanatı Pop-Art ve kaynakları açısından kitle iletişim araçları. [Pop-Art, the movement of consumer society, and mass media in terms of sources] *Atatürk University Journal of Kazım Karabekir Education Faculty*, (8).
- Ünsal, H. (2018). *Etnografik kültür bağlamında sanatta yeni ifade biçimleri* [New forms of expression in art in the context of ethnographic culture]. (Master's thesis, Hacettepe University). YÖK Tez Merkezi.
- Yavuz, H. (2007). *Pop Art döneminin incelenmesi ve Pop Art döneminin günümüz mobilya tasarımlarına etkileri* [Investigation of pop art term and effects of 21st centuries furniture design]. (Master's thesis, Mimar Sinan University). YÖK Tez Merkezi.
- Warhol, A. (1989). *A Retrospective*. Museum of Modern Art.

### Figure References

- Figure 1.** Vertufineart (2016, March 9) Andy Warhol, *Success is a Job in New York*, 1949 [Illustration].  
<https://www.vertufineart.com/news/47/>
- Figure 2.** Minniemuse (n.d.) Andy Warhol, *À la recherche du shoe perdu*, I. Miller Shoes, 1955 [Illustration].

<https://www.minniemuse.com/articles/musings/the-shoes-of-andy-warhol>

**Figure 3.** Wikimedia (n.d.) Andy Warhol, *Campbell's Soup Cans*, 1962 [Synthetic polymer paint and pencil on canvases]. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=167675044>

**Figure 4.** Norton Simon Museum (n.d.) Andy Warhol, *Brillo Boxes*, 1964 [Silkscreen print]. <https://www.nortonsimon.org/art/detail/P.1969.144.001-100/>

**Figure 5.** Dailyartmagazine (2025, June 15) Andy Warhol, *Ladies & Gentlemen*, 1975 [Silkscreen print]. <https://www.dailyartmagazine.com/pride-month-andy-warhols-ladies-and-gentlemen/>

**Figure 6.** Artbma (n.d.) Andy Warhol, *The Last Supper*, 1986 [Silkscreen print]. <https://collection.artbma.org/objects/38516/the-last-supper#>

### Author Biography

Duygu Çetin completed her undergraduate and master's studies in Fashion and Textile Design at Eskişehir Technical University. She is pursuing a Doctor of Arts degree in Art and Design at Eskişehir Osmangazi University.

She has been employed as a Research Assistant within the Department of Textile and Fashion Design, Faculty of Fine Arts, at Süleyman Demirel University since 2022.

Her research focuses on ecological printing techniques, natural dyeing, and sustainable textile applications, and her artistic practice has been featured in many national and international group exhibitions.

For correspondence: [karakocduygu@gmail.com](mailto:karakocduygu@gmail.com)

## CHAPTER 2

### Traces of Play in Shirin Neshat's *Unveiling*: A Reading Through Huizinga

Engin DÜMLÜPINAR

#### Introduction

In the field of contemporary art, Shirin Neshat stands out as a prominent figure who masterfully interweaves social and individual issues. Her work, shaped by the immigrant experience following the Iranian Islamic Revolution, explores themes of womanhood, identity, and cultural belonging within the context of social transformation. Calligraphies inscribed on the female body, symbolic motifs associated with Islamic faith, and concepts projected onto Eastern societies through the Western gaze frequently appear in her art. These elements function not merely as aesthetic devices but also as tangible expressions of a personal search for meaning. Rather than presenting definitive judgments or absolute truths, Neshat foregrounds her own existential and social inquiries. Through this approach, her works become an open-ended space for dialogue that resonates on both local and global levels.

This chapter focuses on the *Unveiling* series, which laid the foundations for the *Women of Allah* series that brought her international recognition. The *Unveiling* series, which has not been extensively examined in the existing literature and whose critical role in Neshat's artistic development has not been sufficiently emphasized, constitutes the main subject of this study, aiming to fill the gap in the literature. The creative process of *Unveiling*, which emerged as an artistic playground where Neshat, without any external concerns, sought answers solely to her inner questions, forms the central focus of this work. The study aims to analyze the artist's improvisational and experimental approach in this series through Johan Huizinga's (1872–1945) concept of *homo ludens*<sup>1</sup>, developed by the Dutch cultural historian, philosopher, linguist, and thinker who, in his seminal work *Homo Ludens* (1938), examined the social and cultural functions of play.

Drawing on qualitative research methods, this study analyzes both primary and secondary sources. The primary material consists of Shirin Neshat's *Unveiling* series, in particular the photographic

---

<sup>1</sup> Homo Ludens: Latin for “man the player.”

prints exhibited at Franklin Furnace in 1993 and the accompanying exhibition materials such as the brochure and press release. Although the *Unveiling* exhibition also included installation and film components, this study focuses on the photographic works and their documentary context. Within this corpus, the analysis undertakes a focused comparison of two key images: the portrait used on the *Unveiling* exhibition poster and *Rebellious Silence* from the subsequent *Women of Allah* series, which together crystallize the formal and conceptual shift between the two bodies of work. The artist's own statements in interviews and autobiographical texts are used to reconstruct the creative process, while the secondary corpus comprises academic publications and critical essays that discuss Neshat's work in relation to gender, representation and Islamic visual culture. The analysis consists of close visual reading of these two central images, framed by Johan Huizinga's concept of *homo ludens*, with a particular focus on the ludic dimension of artistic production.

The relatively small scale and lesser-known status of the series mean that only a limited amount of visual and written material is available. However, this scarcity does not prevent an understanding of its artistic and conceptual significance; rather, it enhances the originality of the present study's contribution. The chapter returns to an early stage of Neshat's artistic trajectory and examines how the creative power of play is transformed into artistic production. Because the emergence of this series is closely tied to the artist's earlier development, the chapter therefore devotes some space to reconstructing Neshat's artistic formation as the ground on which the ludic space of *Unveiling* could arise.

### **Shirin Neshat's Artistic Journey and Search for Identity**

Shirin Neshat's art has been shaped as a manifestation of her personal and cultural existence. Born and raised in Iran, the artist found herself in a completely different culture and system of values when she went to the United States at the age of seventeen for her university education. This experience created a profound cultural shock for her, yet Neshat chose to exist, to struggle, and to construct her identity within this new social context. While studying painting at the University of California, Berkeley, the artist attempted to establish a balance between Western art practices and her own cultural heritage, but in her own words, she felt "totally lost":

I immediately realized that my idea of art and being an artist was stupidly romantic. In order to be an artist, you have to have ideas that are more than intuitive. You have to know what you have to say. For the first several years of school, I was trying to come up with ideas that bridged my Persian and Islamic heritage with what I was learning about Western art. That's so typical of non-Western artists who study at Western schools: trying to build an identity by building a bridge. I was making paintings, prints, and works on paper with Persian iconography. Lots of surrealistic shapes and female figures (which, ironically, eventually resurfaced in my more recent art practice). I don't think the other students felt they could tap into what I was making (Cohen, 2019).

Shirin Neshat completed her undergraduate studies in 1979, but the Iranian Islamic Revolution that took place in the same year prevented her from returning home and initiated an exiled life that would become an indispensable part of her identity. Continuing her education, the artist completed her Master of Fine Arts in 1983 and subsequently moved to New York. During this period, Neshat presented her works to various galleries but did not receive positive responses, leading her to conclude that art was not a field she could pursue professionally. Working in various jobs to support herself, Neshat entered an intense process of interaction with artists, architects, and philosophers when she began working on the projects of Storefront for Art and Architecture, an alternative art space in Manhattan. Referring to Storefront as "a cultural laboratory" and to her time there as "my real education," Neshat began to recognize her own artistic potential as a result of these interactions. For nearly ten years she produced almost no works, and the limited number of works she created were destroyed (Danto, 2000). This *cocoon* process, in which Neshat reconstructed herself as an artist, continued until the early 1990s.

After eleven years away from Iran, Shirin Neshat's first visit to her country in 1990 became a turning point in her artistic career. Observing the profound transformations that had taken place in society after the Revolution confronted Neshat with difficult questions. This visit was not only a confrontation with the past, but also the beginning of an intense search to understand the post-revolutionary transformation of society. Neshat described this period as follows:

At the beginning in the 1990s when I traveled frequently to my country, I became obsessed with the experience. I found



myself both fascinated and terrified by the impact of the revolution. There was so much that I didn't understand that I desperately wanted to understand: for example, how and why the revolution was formed and what were the main philosophical and ideological ideas behind this change. In a sense, coming to terms with this subject strangely made me feel less distant and more a part of the community. Since then it has been an amazing process; every experience and question has led to many more (MacDonald, 2004).

After her visits to Iran, Shirin Neshat began to direct her creative process with the desire to keep alive, through art, the emotional and intellectual ties she had established with her country. During this period, she rented an apartment and dedicated two days a week to reflecting on her experiences in Iran and developing new ideas about art. At first, she drew her hands and began adding inscriptions on these drawings. With the help of her friend Plauto, she then took the process a step further by photographing parts of the body, such as hands and feet, which were permitted to be visible in public within Iranian culture. She printed photocopies of these photographs and wrote excerpts from poetry books she had brought from Iran onto them. Neshat stated that these works, which she likened to playing, were not produced for exhibition purposes but were created with a purely instinctive approach. She expressed that these early works were not intended for any exhibition, that they were produced entirely instinctively and were, in her words, “totally playful” (Cohen, 2019). This instinctive and improvisational process paved the way for Shirin Neshat’s first solo exhibition, *Unveiling*, and shaped the fundamental orientations that determined her mode of expression. This creative practice can be regarded as a reflection of the relationship established with the creative potential of play. Indeed, the artistic approach Neshat developed during this period can be interpreted within the framework of Johan Huizinga’s concept of *homo ludens*.

### **Homo Ludens and Neshat’s Playground**

Johan Huizinga’s concept of *homo ludens* considers play as the foundation of human culture and the source of creativity. According to Huizinga, play is not merely a form of entertainment or pastime, but also a fundamental element in the formation and development of culture. Play is defined as an activity that transcends the direct necessities of life, enabling individuals to create meaning

and shaping the symbolic structure of society. As an action that lies outside the realm of daily life, play is free, fictional, and meaning-laden, supporting cultural production at both individual and social levels. Within this framework, Huizinga explains the relationship between play and culture through the idea that play is a fundamental basis and a factor of culture (Huizinga, 1955, pp. 3-5). This approach provides a strong conceptual framework for understanding the aesthetic, legal, and artistic components of culture. Huizinga was the first thinker who sought to determine how play permeates all areas of culture (Robert, 1978).

In *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga strongly associates art with play and especially relates music to this concept. According to him, music by its very nature bears the quality of play, a fact that is also evident in linguistic expressions. In many languages the verb used for playing music is the same as that used for playing games, which demonstrates that the deep connection between music and play finds a universal correspondence at both cultural and linguistic levels (Huizinga, 1955, p. 35). As a form of art recreated in every performance and emerging as a transient experience, music is, in line with Huizinga's definition of play, an activity whose meaning lies within the process itself. However, Huizinga makes a different assessment in the context of the plastic arts. In the plastic arts, the artist's dependence on the material, the formal rules, and the technical requirements make the concept of play less apparent in this field. The artist's free creativity must be combined with patience and technical skill in the plastic arts. This makes it difficult to view the creative process in the plastic arts as a direct act of play. Furthermore, the fact that plastic arts usually result in long-lasting and tangible works, compared to the transience and immediacy of music, places them in a context more distant from the concept of play (Huizinga, 1955, pp. 166-168). From this perspective, Huizinga relates the distancing of the plastic arts from the sphere of play to the artist's concerns and the formal limitations.

Critics such as Rodriguez emphasize that, despite Huizinga's distinctions, the main thesis of *homo ludens* is that all culture is derived from play. They point out that even pursuits which appear serious or enduring still bear traces of playfulness. According to Rodriguez, play elevates life to a higher spiritual and aesthetic level, which is essential in artistic creation. In the author's words, "religion, philosophy, politics, and art all present an ineradicably playful aspect" (Rodriguez, 2006). It is known that Huizinga's thinking has

influenced avant-garde artists who questioned traditional boundaries and criticized seriousness. For example, the Surrealist writer André Breton praised *Homo Ludens*, stating that the Surrealist movement was largely motivated by passion for play. In this respect, avant-garde art movements provide salient examples of putting Huizinga's ideas into practice. Particularly, experimental art approaches by Fluxus<sup>2</sup> and other contemporary art groups "radicalized Huizinga's theory of play into a revolutionary ethics that effectively abolished any distinction between play and seriousness, or between art and everyday life" (Andreotti, 2002, p. 213). This shows how the playful approach has remained central in contemporary artistic practice despite Huizinga's less optimistic remarks on the plastic arts.

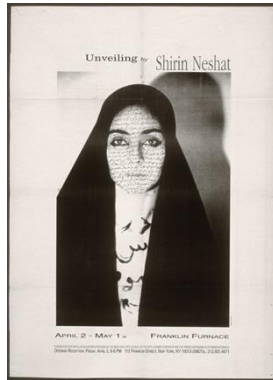
In this context, Shirin Neshat's first notable artistic work, *Unveiling* (Figure 1), bears traces of a playful creative process. In producing this series, Neshat distanced herself from the concerns of traditional artmaking and approached the process as a space for personal expression. This approach corresponds to Johan Huizinga's definition of *homo ludens*. According to Huizinga, play is an activity that finds meaning primarily in the process itself, independent of external concerns. Neshat's decision to create the *Unveiling* series not in accordance with audience expectations or the norms of the art world, but entirely to reflect her personal inquiries and experiences, brings her closer to the identity of *homo ludens*. From Huizinga's perspective, this working process can be described as a kind of "magic circle" of play: a temporally and spatially circumscribed studio practice in which Neshat uses her own body as the only "game piece" and deliberately restricts herself to a small set of formal devices such as black-and-white photography, frontal or closely framed views of veiled and unveiled body parts, and the inscription of Farsi poetry on skin, in order to repeatedly test different combinations of gaze, gesture and text (Huizinga, 1955, pp. 20–21). Working within this self-defined creative space allows the series to be considered not only as an artwork but also as an act of play. Therefore, *Unveiling* constitutes an exception to Huizinga's view of

---

<sup>2</sup> Fluxus was an international network of avant-garde artists that emerged in the 1960s, deriving its name from George Maciunas's planned journal project "Fluxus" in 1961. Early activities took place in 1961 at the AG Gallery in New York, while the first festival, considered a milestone of the movement, "Fluxus Internationale Festspiele Neuester Musik" was held at the Wiesbaden Städtisches Museum from September 1 to 23, 1962. Fluxus adopted an anti-commercial approach that sought to merge art with everyday life, prioritized process and playfulness over the object, and brought together different artistic disciplines (Higgins, 2002, pp. 1-5).

the limited presence of play in the plastic arts, offering an original ground for rethinking the relationship between art and play.

**Figure 1.** Poster presented as part of *Unveiling*, 1993<sup>3</sup>



### The Creative Process as a Ludic Space

*Unveiling*, the series shaped by this playful working process, emerged approximately two years after Neshat began her personal artistic work. Responding to a call issued by Franklin Furnace, a non-profit institution supporting emerging performance artists, she was invited to present her first solo exhibition there in April 1993. In this series, Neshat's self-portraits focusing on body parts such as eyes, feet, and hands were exhibited as photographic prints measuring 19.5 × 26.5 cm (Devine, 2024, p. 11) (Figure 2). The exhibition included not only photographs but also an installation inspired by the motif of the Hand of Fatima, a symbol belonging to the Islamic world, as well as a Super8 film projection of a nude female body. In this way, the exhibition acquired a multi-layered structure that brought together different media and forms. According to the press release, Neshat's focus was on "the ability of an article of clothing to define excessive boundaries that distort a woman's self-image and her public identity." It further emphasized that the artist "is well aware of the profound complexities behind the significance of the veil within

---

<sup>3</sup> The figure reproduces an installation view of *Unveiling* (detail of photographic series), Franklin Furnace, 1993 (photographic slide). Photograph by Marty Heitner. Obtained from the Hemispheric Institute website. The figure is subject to copyright and is included solely for noncommercial academic research and illustrative purposes.

Islamic cultures and does not intend to deny its traditional values to many contemporary women.” The statement also underlined that “the transposition of Western feminist art to another culture is problematic.” Finally, the press release noted: “References to Persian culture, Islamic religious icons, and contemporary Iranian propaganda interact, creating startling new meanings about women’s experience in Iran and challenging stereotypes” (Franklin Furnace, n.d.).

**Figure 2.** Installation view of *Unveiling* (detail of photographic series), 1993<sup>4</sup>



The photographs in the series contain details that question the control of both Western and Iranian religious and cultural norms over the female body. For example, in the photographs from the series (Figure 2), Neshat looks directly into the viewer’s eyes, an action that, according to Iranian cultural norms, a woman is not supposed to do. In Western countries, it is not easy to understand that a Muslim woman should not make eye contact with a foreign man, and even if this accidentally happens once, it should not be repeated a second time, as this is considered a sin (Rokhsari Azar, 2015). Similarly, the inscriptions on the photographs, which at first glance appear to be Qur’anic texts, are in fact the poems of Forugh Farrokhzad, one of the most important figures of modern Iranian literature. In the

---

<sup>4</sup> The figure reproduces an installation view of *Unveiling* (detail of photographic series), Franklin Furnace, 1993 (photographic slide). Photograph by Marty Heitner. Obtained from the Hemispheric Institute website. The figure is subject to copyright and is included solely for noncommercial academic research and illustrative purposes.

portrait on the *Unveiling* poster, the following verses are inscribed on Neshat's face:

No one thinks of the flowers. No one thinks of the fish. No one wants to believe the garden is dying, that its heart has swollen in the heat of this sun, that its mind drains slowly of its lush memories (Farrokhzad, 2007, p. 100).

In an interview, Neshat stated that *Unveiling* focused on the subject of the veil in relation to the female body and the notions of the visible and the invisible. She remarked that the veil, ironically, draws attention to the very body it conceals, and in the photograph used on the exhibition poster (Figure 1), she presented a low-cut neckline in the chest area, an area of the female body that, according to Islam, should not be visible. This choice clearly reflects Neshat's personal and cultural inquiries into identity, expression, and womanhood. Emphasizing that in her work she prefers asking questions rather than providing answers, the artist explained that the fundamental question she posed was: What does it mean to be a woman in Islam? She further noted that her primary approach has always been to create a conceptual dialogue that visually defines and explores some of the negative and stereotypical characterizations of Muslims, particularly women (Sheybani, 1999).

Neshat stated that during this exhibition process she discovered her artistic identity and defined her means of expression. This first exhibition shaped not only her aesthetic sensibility but also her creative methodology. By using her own body both as a medium of expression and as a performative element, Neshat imparted a poetic and multilayered depth to her works. In this process, the positive criticism she received from painter Kiki Smith encouraged her to approach her practice with a long-term perspective and led her to educate herself in photography. In the artist's words, during the *Unveiling* exhibition she was driven by a pure desire to make art and experienced a creative process free from external concerns such as career planning. This freedom enabled her to develop a minimal, stylized, and meaning-laden aesthetic language. Neshat expressed that in this period, with a sense of control that both laid the foundations of her art and strengthened her identity, she performed her art as if it were a ritual (Cohen, 2019). The *Unveiling* series became the first step of this artistic journey shaped by passion.

Today, the first work that comes to mind when speaking of Shirin Neshat is the *Women of Allah* series, which draws its formal roots from the intuitive appeal of the *Unveiling* series. Although the

artist has produced works in different disciplines such as video art and cinema throughout her professional career, the black-and-white portraits adorned with calligraphy have become her signature. The exhibition poster for *Unveiling* (Figure 1) already crystallizes many of the visual elements that would later define this idiom. The stark white background, the minimal composition and the artist's unwavering gaze together stage a scene of self-address rather than public proclamation. Farrokhzad's words, with their secular, introspective and often transgressive female voice, are literally inscribed on the artist's skin, turning her body into a surface where doubt, desire and vulnerability are registered.

**Figure 3.** *Rebellious Silence, Women of Allah series, 1994*<sup>5</sup>



A similar visual grammar reappears in *Rebellious Silence* from the *Women of Allah* series (Figure 3): a frontal, black-and-white portrait, a white background, the chador forming a hard contour around the face, the subject's direct gaze, and the surface of the skin covered in Farsi script. Yet the narrative framework has fundamentally shifted. Here the face is vertically bisected by the barrel of a rifle, which cuts through the lips, nose and forehead, introducing a sense of rupture and psychic fragmentation into an otherwise symmetrical composition. The calligraphic text across the artist's face is no longer Farrokhzad's intimate, existential poetry, but a passage from Tahereh Saffarzadeh's *Allegiance with*

---

<sup>5</sup> The figure reproduces Shirin Neshat's *Rebellious Silence* from the *Women of Allah* series, 1994. Courtesy of Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels. © Shirin Neshat. The figure is subject to copyright and is included solely for noncommercial academic research and illustrative purposes.

*Wakefulness*, a poem that honors faith, martyrdom and revolutionary struggle (Young, 2015). The work no longer speaks primarily from Neshat's own inner conflicts; it stages the ideological and historical narratives that have been imposed on women's bodies in post-revolutionary Iran.

Seen from this perspective, *Unveiling* and *Women of Allah* share a common visual language but differ in their narrative focus. In the early *Unveiling* works, Neshat's distinctive visual language crystallizes out of a highly personal and experimental process centered on her own body and voice. In *Women of Allah*, the same visual structure is redeployed to articulate collective stories about revolution, martyrdom and the politics of representation. What makes Neshat "Neshat" is thus less the specific content of these narratives than the signature visual idiom that first emerged in the intimate space of *Unveiling* and subsequently came to define her photographic practice. This signature visual idiom did not remain confined to the *Women of Allah* series but continued to inform later bodies of work such as *The Book of Kings* (2012), *Our House Is on Fire* (2013), and *The Home of My Eyes* (2015).

*Unveiling* is not only a product of the artist's personal creative process but also an ironic visual critique of social prejudices. In this series, Neshat delivers a direct message to the viewer: a veiled woman can unveil herself, a body that appears conservative can bear a daring expression, and a Muslim woman can be not submissive but rebellious. No identity or appearance is fixed and one-dimensional as it seems on the surface. In this context, *Unveiling* can be read as a multilayered critique directed both at Western clichés about Eastern women and at patriarchal expectations of women within Islamic societies.

## Conclusion

This chapter has examined Shirin Neshat's *Unveiling* series through Johan Huizinga's concept of *homo ludens*. Neshat's experience of this series as a space of purely personal expression, free from external concerns, corresponds to Huizinga's view of play as intrinsically linked to freedom. In particular, contrary to Huizinga's argument regarding the limited presence of play in the plastic arts, *Unveiling* stands as a unique example that, through its instinctive and uninhibited practice of creation, demonstrates the possibility of a ludic mode of production within contemporary photographic practice.



The visual style and ludic approach discovered in *Unveiling* also provided an aesthetic and conceptual foundation for the *Women of Allah* series, which has become the artist's signature work. Although *Unveiling* is often regarded as part of the *Women of Allah* series, this chapter emphasizes that it is an original and complete artwork in its own right. While *Unveiling*, with its sincerity, modesty, and freedom from anxieties, reveals the very essence of art, *Women of Allah* emerged from *Unveiling* but was shaped by the conceptual and technical expectations of the contemporary art world. This contrast underscores the difference in approach between the two series and situates *Unveiling* in a distinctive position within Neshat's artistic career.

By analyzing the decisive role of the *Unveiling* series in Shirin Neshat's artistic development through the lens of homo ludens, this chapter has illuminated an early stage that is often overlooked in the literature. This first step in Neshat's artistic journey strikingly demonstrates how the creative potential of play can influence both individual expression and the emergence of new modes of visual representation.

## References

- Andreotti, L. (2002). Architecture and Play. *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents*, (p.213).
- Cohen, A. (2019, March 2). How Shirin Neshat Got Her Start as an Artist. *Artsy*. Retrieved August 2025 from: <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-shirin-neshat-path-art-school-outcast-contemporary-art-icon>
- Danto, A. (2000). Shirin Neshat. *BOMB* (73), 62.
- Devine, E. (2024). *Translation and Transgression in the Art of Shirin Neshat*. New York, NY: Routledge Focus.
- Farrokhzad, F. (2007). *Sin: Selected Poems of Forugh Farrokhzad*. (S. Wolpé, Trans.). Fayetteville, AR: The University of Arkansas Press.
- Franklin Furnace. (n.d.). Shirin Neshat. *Unveiling*. Franklin Furnace, April 2 – May 1, 1993. Retrieved September 2025 from J.N. Herlin, Inc.: <https://www.jeanneolherlin.com/product/shirin-neshat-unveiling-franklin-furnace-april-2-may-1-1983/>

- Higgins, H. (2002). *Fluxus Experience*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Huizinga, J. (1955). *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Originally published 1949). Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- MacDonald, S. (2004). Between Two Worlds: An Interview with Shirin Neshat. *Feminist Studies*, 30(3), 629.
- Robert, A. (1978). History and Play: Johan Huizinga and His Critics. *History and Theory*, 17(1), 63.
- Rodriguez, H. (2006). The Playful and the Serious: An approximation to Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*. *Game Studies*, 6(1).
- Rokhsari Azar, R. (2015). *Çağdaş Sanatta Aktivizm Bağlamında Shirin Neshat'in Yapıları*. [Yüksek Lisans Tezi]. Akdeniz Üniversitesi Güzel Sanatlar Enstitüsü, Antalya, Türkiye.
- Sheybani, S. (1999). Women of Allah: A Conversation with Shirin Neshat. *Michigan Quarterly Review*, 2(38).
- Young, A. (2015, August 9). Shirin Neshat, Rebellious Silence, Women of Allah series. *Smarthistory*. Retrieved November 2025 from <https://smarthistory.org/shirin-neshat-rebellious-silence-women-of-allah-series/>

### Figure References

- Figure 1.** Neshat, S. (1993). *Unveiling; Shirin Neshat* [Installation poster]. Poster presented as part of the exhibition *Unveiling*, Franklin Furnace, New York, NY, USA. Hemispheric Institute website. Accessed 21 November 2025. <https://hemisphericinstitute.org/en/hidv1-collections/item/2727-shirin-neshat-unveiling-1993.html#galleryc68ee01249-10>
- Figure 2.** Heitner, M. (1993, April 2). *Unveiling; Shirin Neshat*. *Installation view of Unveiling* [Photographic slide]. Exhibited at Franklin Furnace, New York, NY, USA. Hemispheric Institute website. Accessed 21 November 2025. <https://hemisphericinstitute.org/en/hidv1->

collections/item/2727-shirin-neshat-unveiling-1993.html#galleryc68ee01249-5

**Figure 3.** Neshat, S. (1994). *Rebellious Silence, Women of Allah* series [Gelatin silver print with ink on RC paper]. Courtesy of Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels. Gladstone Gallery website. Accessed 22 November 2025. <https://smarthistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Women-of-Allah.jpg>

### **Author Biography**

Engin Dumlupınar received his BA in Journalism from Anadolu University and his MA in Art and Design from Eskişehir Osmangazi University, where he has been pursuing a doctoral degree since 2024. He is currently a lecturer at Bilecik Şeyh Edebali University. His research interests focus on photography and printmaking, with a particular emphasis on contemporary image-making practices and the relationship between visual art and theory.

For correspondence: engindumlupinar@gmail.com

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **The Phenomenon of Violence in Marina Abramović's Performances: Pushing the Boundaries in Art**

Laçin Hazal KARADAĞ

#### **Introduction**

Art has existed since the very emergence of humanity as an expression of individual experiences, social structures, and collective consciousness. In this regard, it has not been confined merely to a form of aesthetic production. Each artwork has been regarded as both a witness to its time and a significant document of its era (Korkmaz, 2025). Wars, uprisings, revolutions, and devastations experienced by societies have been directly reflected in artistic production. Thus, art has become a powerful medium that renders visible the pivotal moments of life.

Violence, like art, has coexisted with human history, leaving profound marks in collective memory throughout the course of life. Whether experienced at the individual or societal level, violence has been a recurring subject in the works of numerous artists across history. Beyond being represented thematically, it has also transformed artistic expression. Some artists have approached the issue from a critical perspective, while others have not only depicted violence but have also embedded it into their materials, methods, and modes of expression. In doing so, artists have produced works that reflect the presence of violence, the experiences of societies, and the marks of historical ruptures. By intertwining these with their personal experiences, they have generated layers that are simultaneously aesthetic and political.

#### **Art and Violence**

The meaning of the word *violence*, which has passed into Turkish from Arabic, is defined as the use of brute force and harsh behavior by individuals who cannot agree on the same idea. Acts of violence, on the other hand, are described in sources as actions carried out with the aim of intimidating and frightening specific segments of society. However, the dictionary meaning of the word limits violence solely to an attack or threat against the physical integrity of others. In fact, violence has a deeper and more multidimensional meaning. It is not only a form of force applied by others. Individuals can also engage in acts of violence against themselves. When evaluated anthropologically, acts of aggression

such as rebellion against the social order also fall within the scope of this concept. In today's world, while the rate of violence directed by individuals against themselves is increasing day by day, the phenomenon of collective violence continues to manifest itself in a way that shakes the world. Internal conflicts within countries, terrorist acts, and genocides continue to be the most significant problems of today's world (Can, 2018, p. 212).

Violence has been studied extensively from a sociological perspective, with its content thoroughly examined. Notably, Michel Foucault, a leading postmodern thinker, and prominent Frankfurt School scholars have explored the concepts of violence and power together. When viewed as a whole, the relationship between violence and power is striking. According to Foucault, Theodor Adorno, and Eric Fromm, violence is essential for establishing and maintaining social order, as power cannot exist without it. Violence plays a crucial role in subjugating society; the two concepts define each other and serve each other (Keskin, 1996, pp. 117, 122).

The relationship between power and violence is readily observable in works of art. A review of art history uncovers numerous pieces that serve the interests of power structures within empires and states. In artworks depicting these hierarchies, invincibility is accentuated and victory is celebrated. For instance, during the Middle Ages, the Church, which held significant authority, often resorted to violence and suffering to reinforce its presence. Art from this era, particularly those illustrating the suffering of Jesus Christ, frequently portrays scenes of violence and agony. The Church's utilization of violence-themed imagery is undoubtedly intentional. The dissemination of devotion to faith through scenes of suffering in frescoes was a deliberate thematic choice, notably influencing the Church's authority. Beyond ecclesiastical murals and religious artworks, mythological themes, battle scenes, and the concept of mortality have been prominent subjects in art for centuries and remain so. The enduring theme of violence, which has persisted over centuries and exerted considerable influence on art, corresponds with the discourses of Michel Foucault and scholars of the Frankfurt School.

Although the definition and depth of art have evolved over the centuries, it has always served as a mirror to life. Every artist reflects aspects of both life and the society they are part of through their works. Therefore, viewing and interpreting works of art in isolation from life can obscure the significance of their meanings. To

comprehensively understand the messages an artist conveys in their works, it is essential to consider the circumstances under which the work was created and the social structure prevalent at that time. Since life is lived within the boundaries established by those in power, regardless of location, analyzing these dynamics is crucial to understanding art and uncovering its hidden meanings.

From the late 18th to the 19th century, art served as a tool for promoting both political and religious agendas. During this era, works were produced to support power and celebrate wars, victories, and leaders. However, as society underwent significant changes, artists began to gain greater independence. With the rise of the critical perspective, wars, resistance movements, and social events began to appear in art through themes of violence and suffering. Especially in the 1960s, the reflection of violence in art became more pronounced (Sayan, 2016, p. 1423).

It is remarkable to observe how, alongside the evolution of artistic expression, violent elements have persisted throughout history. Looking back at art history, many masterpieces have been crafted with violent compositions. Many artworks featuring intense physical, psychological, or symbolic violence exemplify the central role this theme has played in art. The Last Judgment fresco in the *Sistine Chapel* by Michelangelo, Caravaggio's dramatic scenes of executions, and Francis Bacon's depictions of distorted bodies are among notable examples. These works demonstrate that violence has become an integral part of artistic practice, serving both as a narrative device and a powerful means of expression. This suggests that violence is not merely a subject depicted in art, but is also a deeply ingrained aspect of collective memory and individual consciousness. For artists, it may serve as a form of existential inquiry, and at times, it functions as a motivating force that influences their inner world and creative endeavors.

Artemisia Gentileschi (1593–1652), an Italian Baroque artist and one of the first female feminist artists in art history, was seen as a symbol of women's struggle for existence during her lifetime. At 19, she was raped, and the perpetrator was released. Some view Gentileschi as an artist who took revenge for her trauma through her art. Her painting, *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, supports this view (Figure 1). At first glance, the work appears to depict a biblical scene. Judith, portrayed in the painting, is shown as a strong and courageous figure. It is impossible to detect any emotion, such as pity, struggle, or fear, in the portrait of Judith killing Holofernes. Judith is depicted

as an impassive, self-assured, and fearless character. With a determined and cool-headed appearance, Judith holds her sword tightly and kills Holofernes with ease. Upon examination, it is clear that the artist did not contribute to any religious ideas. When the viewer gazes at Judith, they encounter a character who is unbothered by her position, fearless, and even ruthless. In this work, shaped by the impact of traumatic experiences, the artist has put herself in Judith's place. The character of Holofernes represents Agostino Tassi, who raped Artemisia. Although the artist's works, based on her personal experience, are from an individual perspective, they have become part of social criticism. The artist has produced numerous works on the subjects of violence and trauma (Yılmaz, 2012, p. 266).

**Figure 1.** Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, 1612–1613, (O/C), 158,8 cm x 125,5 cm<sup>1</sup>



Francisco Goya, a prominent figure of the Romanticism movement, produced his notable work *The Third of May 1808*, which illustrates the moment when French forces attempted to invade Spain, and the local populace resisting this invasion were executed by firing squad. In Goya's dramatically composed painting, the figures are portrayed in a state of horror (Figure 2). Goya has created a piece that exemplifies the combination of violence and authority emphasized by Foucault. He employed a highly explicit narrative language, eschewing indirect expression. He conveyed the violence

---

<sup>1</sup> Artemisia Gentileschi's work *Judith Slaying Holofernes* is part of the collection at the Capodimonte Museum in Naples, Italy. This image has been used within the limits of the "fair use" principle for educational, critical, or newsworthy content.

he witnessed in all its raw reality. Nevertheless, by positioning a lantern at the center of the painting, the artist illuminates the impact that power and the desire for power have on people. This work, which marks the first step toward establishing authority, reminds us that violence is one of life's inevitable realities (Çalışkan, 2019, p. 109).

**Figure 2.** Francisco Goya, *The Third of May 1808*, 1814, (O/C), 268 cm x 347 cm<sup>2</sup>



One of the cornerstones of art history, Spanish artist Pablo Picasso vividly reflects the painful face of violence in his work *Guernica* (Figure 3). The work takes its name from the city of Guernica in Spain's Basque region and depicts the bombing of the area by the fascist Franco and Hitler. In his work *Guernica*, Picasso's choice of scale and color harmony is striking. The horror created by violence, which forms the theme of the work, has a more substantial impact thanks to the artist's choices. The figures are positioned in a traditional compositional arrangement. This arrangement directs the viewer to establish a historical connection. The compositional arrangement, the animal figures in the work, the use of light-emitting objects, and the impressions of the space are reminiscent of symbols from the Ancient Period. A figure positioned on the left side of the painting is particularly striking. This figure, carrying her dead child in her arms, is reminiscent of Michelangelo's *Pieta* sculpture from the late 1400s. Picasso approached social reality from a historical

---

<sup>2</sup> Francisco Goya's work titled *The Third of May 1808* is part of the collection at the Prado Museum in Madrid, Spain. This image has been used within the limits of the "fair use" principle for educational, critical, or newsworthy content.



perspective and reinterpreted the violence of his own era with a profound synthesis. With his work *Guernica*, Picasso masterfully reminds viewers that violence and suffering created by power exist regardless of time (Ötğün, 2008, pp. 95, 97).

**Figure 3.** Pablo Picasso, *Guernica*, 1937, (O/C), 349 cm x 776 cm<sup>3</sup>



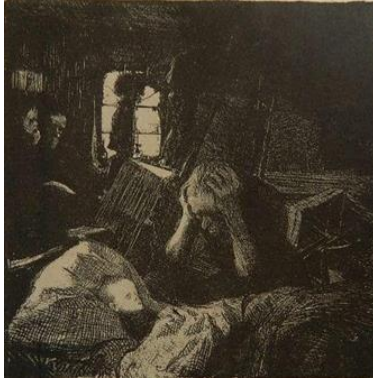
German Expressionism, which holds a significant position in art history following the 19th century, has endeavored to render social realities perceptible. During this era, artists created works that combined their emotional experiences with social events. Kathe Kollwitz, a distinguished artist of this movement, exemplified an ability to reflect the struggles of her time (Şahinbaş, Türker, & Ağçıçek, 2019, p. 170). In response to the devastating effects of the First World War and domestic uprisings, she centered her artistic themes around poverty, motherhood, and pain, supporting these themes through the employment of powerful techniques. The death of her son in an anti-war protest represented the most pivotal turning point in her life. Prior to her personal loss, Kollwitz's works already addressed themes such as the death of innocents and the tragedies of war; thereafter, she continued to explore the remnants of violence within her art. The loss of her son symbolized a convergence of the universal suffering experienced by mothers, with loss, poverty, and the societal worn-down individuals becoming predominant motifs. The use of contrasting light and dark tones, alongside the dramatic impact of black and white and stark lines, intensified the emotional expression of pain (Yönsel, 2021, pp. 2589, 2590). Analyzing her work reveals the potency of her narrative, particularly exemplified in

---

<sup>3</sup> The image of Pablo Picasso's work *Guernica* is part of the collection of the Reina Sofia Museum in Madrid, Spain. This image has been used within the limits of the "fair use" principle for educational, critical, or newsworthy content.

*Need*, the opening piece of her series titled *Ein Weberaufstand* (*The Weavers' Revolt*). The oppressive atmosphere of her period is palpable within the artwork. The child's face, left enshrouded in darkness, is presented with innocence intact. At the same time, the suffering of the figure beside it is conveyed with immediacy to the viewer (Figure 4), (Şahinbaş, Halil, & Ağççek, 2019, p. 165).

**Figure 4.** Kathe Kollwitz, *Ein Weberaufstand: Need*, 1893 -1894, Lithograph<sup>4</sup>



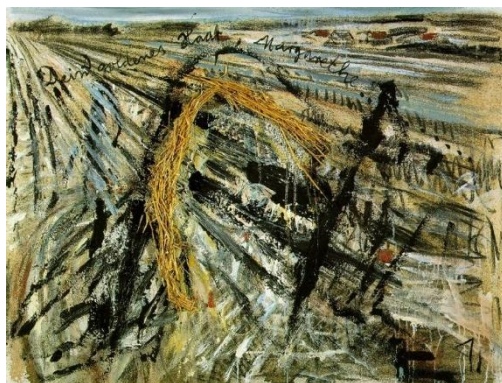
German artist Anselm Kiefer is among those artists whose work creates a space for reckoning. In his pieces, he questions the traumatic traces of the Second World War on both an individual and collective level. Kiefer's artistic practice is, in particular, an attempt to confront the Holocaust, which Germany tried to cover up during the Nazi period. In the artist's paintings, the physical and symbolic layers of historical violence have been transformed into a powerful visual narrative through the use of materials. The materials frequently encountered in Kiefer's works, such as straw, rushes, lead, and coal, are not merely aesthetic choices; they also serve a functional purpose. They are materials that have become symbols, imbued with different meanings specific to their country throughout historical processes. These materials are also used in his work titled *Dein Goldenes Haar*. Inspired by the Jewish poet Paul Celan's poem

---

<sup>4</sup> Kathe Kollwitz's work, *Ein Weberaufstand: Need*, is part of the collection at the Kathe Kollwitz Museum in Cologne, Germany. The copyright for her works belongs to the museum. However, within the scope of this study, they have been used to a limited extent based on the principle of "fair use" in content that has educational, critical, or news value.

*Todesfuge (Death Fugue)*, the straw used in this work represents Magritte's typical depiction of a German woman's hair, as mentioned in the poem. Coal, on the other hand, represents the bodies of black-haired Jewish women and a people destroyed by burning. There is a sharp distinction between the two materials (Figure 5). Straw, which burns easily, and coal, which takes a long time to burn, are resistant and durable materials. These two materials, frequently used in Kiefer's works, symbolically represent his opposition to the genocide that took place in his country. His choice of materials transforms the glorified German identity and the annihilation of the Jewish people into a profound allegory. Kiefer's works are not limited to being a historical document or an act of remembrance. They also open up a space for critical inquiry into how social memory is shaped, how it is attempted to be forgotten, and how it is rebuilt. They allow us to see the background of what is beautiful, glorified, and idealized. The artist's productions appear to be quite effective politically, philosophically, and sensually. With his works that bring different questions to life in the mind, Kiefer reminds us not only of what happened in his own country but also of the collective traumas of today's world (Can, 2018, pp. 216, 217).

**Figure 5.** Anselm Kiefer, *Dein Goldenes Haar, Margarethe* 1981, (M/M on canvas), 130 cm x 170 cm<sup>5</sup>



<sup>5</sup> Anselm Kiefer's 1981 work, *Dein Goldenes Haar, Margarethe*, is part of the Sanders Collection in Amsterdam. Within the scope of this work, content with educational, critical, or news value has been used on a limited basis within the framework of the "fair use" principle.

Artists have been influenced by the social events of their time and have incorporated these elements into their works. Art, incorporating this complex concept, has drawn the viewer into a deep intellectual inquiry. The theme of violence has often been explored as a social critique that extends beyond the aesthetic dimension of art, with many works evoking negative emotions through a terrifying appearance (Keten, 2019, p. 251). The theme of violence is found in a wide range of works, from Leonardo da Vinci's paintings to Gottfried Helnwein's hyperrealistic pieces, as well as the works of artists such as Henry Hargreaves, Marc Quinn, Otto Mühl, and Carl Fredrik Reuterswärd. In addition, artists such as Georgia O'Keeffe, Otto Dix, Anish Kapoor, and Ai Weiwei are also among the important names who reflect traces of violence in their works.

### **Performance Art**

Following the 1789 Revolution, a desire for socialist living began to take root in France. However, in the newly established social and political order, art was glorified and made unique by those in power. This glorification did not serve to liberate art, but rather to reproduce class divisions. Art was assigned a specific social mission and thus became a tool that reinforced the ideology of those in power. In this sense, art became a mechanism that facilitated the domination of society by those in power and their penetration into every layer of the social structure. During this period, centered on utopian visions of modern life, art was assigned a guiding role in determining the direction of society. However, the uprisings that broke out in Paris in 1848 cast a shadow over these utopias and gave way to a fierce class struggle. The distance between the bourgeoisie and the working class deepened, and these events led to the working class being severely suppressed. By the end of this period, all hopes for life had been completely shattered. This seismic transformation in the social structure had a direct impact on art as well. The understanding of art, which had been considered independent of moral and utilitarian concepts until this period, underwent a radical change after 1848. The idea that “art must benefit society” gave way to the view that “utility is the greatest enemy of art.” As Peter Bürger, Walter Benjamin, and Charles Baudelaire have stated, art is not obliged to represent reality. It only needs to represent itself. It has ceased to be an object of pleasure and has taken its place as an intervention in real life. The notions of good, right, or beautiful have now been erased

from the center of art. The ugliness and evil of metropolitan life have taken center stage, giving rise to a counter aesthetic (Artun, 2003)<sup>6</sup>.

Industrialization, and especially the First World War, caused a profound collapse in every area of life. In addition to the chaos created by the war, efforts to keep the bourgeoisie afloat in the economy led to conflict between capital and labor. The class conflict, confusion, and turmoil that ensued paved the way for the emergence of the Dada Movement. Switzerland's declaration of neutrality during the war made Zurich a meeting point for artists seeking refuge from the war and its associated chaos. In 1916, artists convened under the auspices of *Cabaret Voltaire* in Zurich, adopting a radical stance against prevailing social and aesthetic values (Sürmeli, 2012, p. 338). Emerging amid the First World War, Dadaism rejected all conventional forms of artistic order. Marcel Duchamp, a prominent Dadaist artist, introduced a significant innovation with his work *Fountain* (Lynton, 1989, p. 134). While some interpreted Duchamp's incorporation of ready-made objects into art as the demise of artistic creation, contrary to this perception, Duchamp attributed a renewed meaning to art's detachment from the material world. By questioning the very nature of art, he foregrounded the inquiry, "Who decides what is art?" (Gökgöz, 2023, pp. 373, 374).

Through Duchamp's transformation of a ready-made object into a work of art, artists were allowed to explore avenues beyond traditional painting and sculpture. An era began in which artists faced the question, "How can we produce something different?" Within the framework of this period, this approach, perceived as eccentric and even extreme, served as the initial step toward the development of the Dadaist and Futurist movements. The genesis of performance art is also rooted in the anarchist performances of Dada, surrealist exhibitions, and Futurist demonstrations. Futurism, which emerged prior to the First World War and continued to influence various art disciplines until the conclusion of the Second World War, occupied a prominent position among 20th-century art movements. Originating in Italy, Futurism also laid the groundwork for other

---

<sup>6</sup>This text is an article published on Ali Artun's personal website. This article is adapted from Peter Bürger's book *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, published in 2003 by İstanbul: İletişim / Sanat Hayat Publications. Ali Artun is the author of pages 9-32 of the aforementioned source. Ali Artun also created the internet article referenced in this section. Cf. <https://aliartun.com/yazilar/kuramda-avangardlar-ve-burgerin-avangard-kurami>

influential movements of the 20th century (Martinez & Demiral, 2014, p. 183).

*The Futurist Synthetic Theater Manifesto*, published in 1915, proposed that the body could be used as a form of artistic expression. Actions similar to those seen in 1960s performance art took place. In Russia, a group of artists wore costumes that surprised the audience and performed various acts. *Cabaret Voltaire*, which opened in Zurich in 1946, was a venue where poems were read accompanied by works of art and where, in addition to productions such as paintings and sculptures, artistic expressions such as dance and puppet shows were performed. In this regard, it is worth noting that Dadaist and Futurist artists were pioneers of performance art (Şenel, 2015, pp. 164-165).

In 1953, Robert Rauschenberg erased a drawing by Willem de Kooning, creating the action piece titled *Erased de Kooning Drawing*. This radical gesture was an important step in questioning the production methods and value perceptions of art. Subsequently, John Cage's work titled *4:33* expanded the boundaries of art through silence and random sounds, securing its place among early examples of performance art (Yayan & Gök, 2020, p. 393).

By the 1960s, the Fluxus Movement had emerged. Although it cannot be fully defined as an art movement, it has been referred to as such in the literature. Drawing on the cultural dynamics of the period and characterized by a rebellious spirit, this movement sought to distance art from bourgeois circles, intellectual elites, and the professionalized commercial culture that dominated the era. Its fundamental goal was to separate art from artificiality, imitation, and illusion. Many artists, such as John Cage, Joseph Beuys, and Nam June Paik, who cannot be categorized within a single movement, embraced the Fluxus Movement and produced works that were also included in other movements (Martinez & Demiral, 2014, p. 186). Fluxus enabled performance art to gain prominence. With the 1960s and 1970s, Performance Art brought the artist's body to the forefront as the sole material (Özayten, 1997, p. 700).

Throughout art history, the body, depicted on a two-dimensional surface for centuries, has become an artistic material presented through performance art. Artists who create art using the body employ it to convey their message with excellent sharpness and intensity. The aim is to shake and awaken the order that the audience has established for themselves, separate from chaos. Performance art has its own unique method. Although it is staged, the performance is

entirely spontaneous. It differs from theater in that it is not rehearsed beforehand. With the advent of the 1960s, avant-garde art, associated with a political ideology, shifted its focus from traditional to action-based productions. Joseph Beuys attempted to convey both the spirit of the era and the meaning of performance art by stating, “Human beings are truly alive only when they realize that they are creative, artistic beings, and if it is a conscious act, even peeling potatoes can be considered a work of art” (Quoted in Korkmaz & Kobat, 2019, p. 126).

### **The Element of Violence in Performance Art**

Performance artists use their own bodies to illustrate the realities of their era directly. Their work frequently functions as a political statement, reflecting the social conditions in which they operate. Consequently, performances may be perceived as cruel, painful, and shocking, not due to excess or savagery, but because they mirror the harshness of authentic life. The central argument posits that performance art encapsulates the truths of its time, demonstrating that the experiences depicted on stage parallel the societal realities of its era. While some interpret the tendency toward pain and violence as masochism, the underlying intentions of the artists are more profound. As Özkaras (2021, p. 505) articulates, these artists employ masochism symbolically to reveal the foundational agreements we enter into in order to confront our complex physical existence; “These artists did not advocate masochism because they were masochists, but rather they employed it to symbolically disclose the structure of the agreements we forge to reconcile with the ambiguous and unsettling consciousness of our bodies” (Quoted in Özaras, 2021, p. 505).

Artists who engage in masochism within the realm of performance art and are regarded as extreme examples are identified as the Viennese Actionists. Herman Nitsch, Otto Muehl, and Günter Brus constitute the members of this group. Their performances prominently featured materials such as feces and blood often conducted entirely unclothed. Herman Nitsch, the most renowned artist within this cohort, articulated that the incorporation of nudity and materials like blood and feces in his performances served as a means of purification from socially repressed emotions related to violence and lust (Antmen, 2014, p. 224).

**Figure 6.** Hermann Nitsch, *Orgy Mystery Theater*, 6-Day Performance 2022<sup>7</sup>



*The Viennese Actionists*, who emerged in the late 1960s, developed performances that examined both their physical endurance and the boundaries of audience tolerance. Performances featuring nudity, defecation, the utilization of animal carcasses, and self-harm became characteristic modalities of the group. Herman Nitsch personally engaged in these performances, as did other participants. Additionally, Chris Burden, Stelarc, Marina Abramović, and Orlan incorporated their own bodies into their artistic expressions (Yılmaz, 2013, p. 368).

Australian artist Herman Nitsch emphasized that art should appeal to all our senses. According to him, in order to bridge the gap between art and life, it was necessary to shake up sanctified art with reality. Nitsch argued that this distance between art and life could only be achieved through pain and disgust. He often uses animals in his performances because they are creatures slaughtered for human consumption. His performances delve into the unseen aspects of civilization. Nitsch constructs his artworks with tremendous horror. The artist's success in conveying horror and fear undoubtedly stems from his upbringing during the Second World War, a period marked by fear and horror (Yılmaz, 2013, p. 370).

---

<sup>7</sup> Hermann Nitsch passed away in 2022. The copyright and use of his works are not yet free. The photograph used was taken by Günter Feyerl and licensed by Nitsch. Although the copyright is not free, this visual, included in the research, has been used on a limited basis within the framework of the "fair use" principle in content that carries educational, critical, or news value.



Like Herman Nitsch and Chris Burden, Gina Pane prepared her performances as special rituals for viewers and art history. She constructed her performances based on the idea that the one who finds healing for a wound, pain, or suffering is also wounded. She believed that if there was a problem, she had to experience it herself first. Gina Pane's actions were disturbing primarily to viewers. His actions on the body, directly reflecting violence, have been unbearable for the viewer. In one performance, he cut his mouth, mixed the flowing blood with milk, and gargled with it. The artist has stated that he felt relieved by these performances. He burned, dismembered, and cut his body, putting himself in difficult situations. The artist emphasized that wounds heal and scars fade, but social violence does not disappear. These scars are temporary, but the violence that prevails in society is a significant problem. Pane's performances aimed to shake society's core thoughts and prompt people to turn inward and ask questions (Aydemir, 2018, pp. 297, 299). The artists who performed these acts, which were seen as masochistic at the time, had a connection to the wars. Chris Burden carried out his *Vita Accionci* actions during the Vietnam War. Through his performances, he tried to understand what was happening far away by experiencing it himself. By suffering similar pain, he enabled both himself and his audience to empathize (Özkaras, 2021, p. 509).

Alongside the *Viennese Actionists*, performance artists have staged actions centered on the experience of pain. The impact of wars has been a significant element in these actions. The actions were seen as a reflection of social pain. Pyotr Pavlensky, Ron Athey, Bob Flanagan, and many other artists have carried out actions reminiscent of physical pain (Özkaras, 2021, p. 513).

### **Marina Abramović**

Marina Abramović was born in Yugoslavia in 1946. During this period, the country's form of government changed, and a communist regime came to power. Her parents were recognized as *war heroes* who served the new government. Abramović is one of two children of partisans who were wholeheartedly loyal to the regime. Due to her mother being poisoned during her birth, she required approximately one year of treatment. Servants raised Marina during this period. The artist's health problems began as a result of malnutrition, and at a young age, her family sent her to live with her grandmother, Milica. Abramović, who stayed with Milica

for many years, felt a deep distance between herself and her parents during this time and began to see them as strangers. Her family, whom she only saw on weekends, became “two strangers who brought toys she did not like” in her eyes. According to Marina's accounts, Milica was deeply devoted to her religion and strictly adhered to its rituals. She raised Abramović with the same discipline. After years with Milica, the artist returned to her family home and began living under military discipline. The only commonality between these two seemingly different lifestyles was their strict rules (Abramović, 2020, p. 17).

Abramović came under strict supervision upon returning to his family home. He faced violence in his relationship with his family, especially his mother, who was quite cold and distant. His longing for the ritualistic atmosphere of the home he shared with Milica, combined with his feelings of jealousy towards his brother, made it impossible for him to adapt. As a result of his jealousy towards his brother and the behavioral disorders that arose from his adaptation problems, he was subjected to violence by his parents. In such a harsh environment and a family life dominated by military discipline, his affinity for art also manifested itself in a kind of imposition. His mother meticulously planned the books Abramović would read, the plays he would watch, and the foreign words he would memorize. His introduction to art also began during this period. His parents organized a workshop for him at the age of 12. Although Abramović states that he had many cultural opportunities, he particularly emphasizes that this was essentially his mother's imposition. The artist stated that she was obliged to follow her mother's directives, otherwise she would face severe violence (Abramović, 2020, p. 28). This situation presents an opportunity to thoroughly examine the influence of the artist's personal experiences and family dynamics on her artistic output. The artist experienced an existential crisis in light of this information. The profound change in the order of the land where she was born, the disciplined and rigid mindset of lands far from freedom, and the alienation and lack of love she felt towards her parents led her to question her identity and desires, causing a distinct existential crisis. This process played a central role in shaping Abramović's artistic practice. When looking at the artist's performances, the reflections of the strict discipline and violence she witnessed from her parents are clearly visible. In addition to their sharp language of violence, pain, and pushing the limits of the body, the artist's performances also have a highly

ritualistic effect. Her performances, reminiscent of rituals, have influenced her work as a trace left over from the period she lived with her grandmother, Milica.

Marina studied at the Belgrade Academy of Fine Arts. After painting for a while, she began experimenting with performance art. The artist felt that the two-dimensional surface limited her and wanted to experience the immense freedom that comes with being an artist. She realized that fire, water, the body, or anything else could be her medium. It is understandable that the word “freedom” is a distant feeling for Marina and people who do not live in a free country. Abramović's realization that she could liberate herself through art, despite having strict curfews, secured her place among the important names in art history (Abramović, 2020, p. 47). Setting out on the path to freedom with the idea that art could be produced as performance, Abramović proposed many performances in Belgrade, but they were not accepted. Her proposals included ideas such as playing Russian roulette and washing the audience's clothes (Abramović, 2020, p. 62). She had the opportunity to perform her first serious performance in 1973. She presented her *Rhythm 10* performance at the Edinburgh Festival. The performance she performed transformed her from the Marina she knew and recognized into someone completely different. Abramović described the impact the performance had on her, saying, “I had experienced absolute freedom. I felt that my body was limitless and infinite; that the pain did not matter, that nothing mattered, and this poisoned me” (Abramović, 2020, pp. 81, 82). She found a space where she could be free, and this space earned her a place among the important names in art history.

### **The Phenomenon of Violence in Marina Abramović's Performances**

Some interpret Marina Abramović's performances as a political conceptualization of the female body or the embodied experiences. Others assess them as interrogations of the physical limits (Kılıç, 2023, p. 148). The artist has articulated that she questions the boundaries of the body through her artistry, yet she has not confined herself solely to this notion. The work possesses a deeper, more multi-layered architecture. While art is often perceived as being solely about the artist's intended message, this view is both inadequate and restrictive. The perception and sensibility of the viewer significantly influence the meaning conveyed by art. The

manner in which the viewer perceives and interprets art enhances its significance. This interaction is also evident in Abramović's performances. The *Rhythm* series has been extensively discussed and analyzed. Abramović has not merely created multiple layers of meaning around the body; she has also transported the viewer from their immediate context into a different realm an expansive universe of ideas.

Marina Abramović's *Rhythm* series comprises the artist's early works. The *Rhythm 10* performance, exhibited at the Edinburgh Festival in 1973, was one of the cornerstones of this series. The performance consists of the artist placing her hand on a table and rapidly passing 20 different knives between each of her fingers (Figure 7). She recorded the rhythmic sounds produced by the knives during the performance. She moves the knife as quickly as possible between her fingers, stabbing it in and out. With each cut, she moves on to another knife. Abramović imposes a limitation on the action by restricting herself to using each knife only twice. She then loops the sounds made by the knives and the moment they cut her fingers, while continuing to act. The white cloth on the table makes the blood flowing from the cut fingers more visible, while also presenting the audience with a visual expression of pain and violence. Marina's one-hour performance includes a list of instructions (Özinan, 2017, pp. 14, 15). The instruction reads;

I turn on the tape recorder. I take the first knife and insert it between my left fingers as quickly as possible. Every time I cut myself, I change the knife. When I have used all the knives, I rewind the tape. In the first part of the performance, I listened to the tape recording. I maintain my concentration (Özinan, 2017, pp. 14, 15).

**Figure 7.** Marina Abramović, *Rhythm 10*, 1973 Performance Photograph<sup>8</sup>



Marina has also included instructions in her other performances. This situation can actually be interpreted as a representation of her relationship with her mother. Abramović wrote about growing up and living in a home where her family's pathological structure turned into oppressive discipline in her autobiography, *Walking Through Walls*. In her autobiography, the artist mentions that her mother would leave notes on her desk every morning before going to work, telling her daughter what to do. She states that the instructions ranged from the number of French words and sentences she had to learn to the specific books she had to read. Everything was planned for her by her mother. When she did not follow these instructions, she was severely punished (Abramović, 2020, p. 28). Marina's creation of a list of instructions was an extension of this pathological relationship with her mother. Her mother repeatedly abused her, creating a cold and loveless relationship. The violence she witnessed directly influenced the artist's performances.

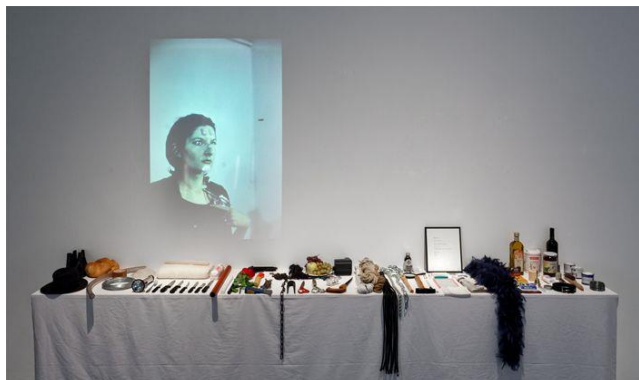
Undoubtedly, the root of Abramović's sharp language lies in her experiences with her family. Therefore, it is not surprising that the artist swiftly moves the knife between her fingers and harms herself while following the instructions left by her mother. Her art consistently reaches a social level from an individual perspective. She not only put herself in an experience of violence but also brought her pain to the stage. She

---

<sup>8</sup> This photograph of Marina Abramović's performance was exhibited at the first Lisson Gallery exhibition in 2010. The image used was taken from the official Lisson Gallery website. Within the scope of this work, it has been used to a limited extent based on the principle of "fair use" in content that carries educational, critical, or news value.

embarked on an effort to redefine herself and shaped her performances “under the influence of established domination” (Derin, 2017, p. 333).

**Figure 8.** Marina Abramović, *Rhythm 0*, 1974. Performance, Six hours<sup>9</sup>



Marina Abramović continued her performance series titled *Rhythm*. Over time, *Rhythm* evolved into a series with different versions and is among the artist's most notable works. In 1974, the *Rhythm 0* performance, part of the series, was an experience that delved into the dark recesses of human nature and questioned the individual's position of power over others. Seventy-two different objects were placed on a table in the gallery where the performance was held (Figure 8). Various objects, including feathers, pens, perfume, needles, scissors, hammers, tape, flowers, and knives, were provided to the audience, allowing them to use them freely on the artist's body. Abramović left a note stating that she alone was responsible for the consequences. The artist, who stated that she allowed the objects on the table to be used on her body and left instructions, continued her performance silently and motionless for six hours. This performance, which began as an innocent game,

---

<sup>9</sup> Due to copyright restrictions, the original images from Marina Abramović's performance could not be included. The images from the *Rhythm 0* performance are protected by copyright held by Marina Abramović and the New York Artists' Rights Society (ARS). They were taken from a post shared from the Museum of Parallel Narratives exhibition, part of L'Internationale, organized by the Barcelona Museum of Contemporary Art in 2011. The performance was not presented directly to the audience via video at the exhibition. The materials used and photographs taken of the artist during the performance were used in the exhibition. The photograph is by Rafael Vargas. Within the scope of this work, it has been used to a limited extent based on the principle of “fair use” in content that carries educational, critical, or news value.

reached a threatening dimension in the following hours. The audience began to harm the artist, sexually harassed her, and pointed the gun at her (Yorulmaz, 2024, p. 225). The artist ended the performance at this point, initiating a moment of confrontation for the audience. Faced with these horrific acts, the audience members expressed that they did not understand what had led them to this situation as they attempted to leave the venue (Yorulmaz, 2024, p. 230). Marina's performance fundamentally exposes a profound phenomenon. It evokes references from Emil Cioran's *The Book of Decay*. In his work, Cioran states;

The murderer uses his freedom without limit and cannot resist the idea of his power. When it comes to ending the lives of others, he is on the same level as each of us. If those we kill in our thoughts truly ceased to exist, there would be no one left on earth. We carry within us a timid executioner, an unrealized murderer (Cioran, 2000, p. 56).

Marina Abramović's *Rhythm 0* performance serves as a physical manifestation of Cioran's reflections. At a time when societal punishment was abolished, the latent executioner within human nature was brought to light. All individuals present that day faced their own darker inclinations. Although more than fifty years have elapsed, Abramović's performance continues to compel us to explore the depths of human nature. The performance has evolved into a tool that critically examines social and individual psychology. Today, even in the absence of direct participation, it bears a significance that prompts reflection on the individual's relationship with both self and societal norms.

Another of Marina Abramović's works addressing social violence is the performance *Lips of Thomas* (Figure 9). This performance, which lasted two hours, was an endurance test for both the artist and the audience. Among those who witnessed the performance, some reported feeling a deep sense of guilt while watching the artist endure pain. This performance, which presented real physical pain within an aesthetic framework, prompted the audience to question the ethics of what they were witnessing. Some audience members questioned how and why they were watching the performance. The artist drew a star symbol representing communism on her own body. In her performance, Marina drew the star symbol representing her country on her body with a razor blade. She then read the instructions and began the performance. Throughout the performance, she consumed a kilogram of honey, drank wine,

whipped herself, and lay down on a block of ice shaped like a cross. She placed a heater on the spot where she lay down to prevent the blood from flowing from the cut in her stomach from stopping and to ensure its flow. In this way, she did not allow the bleeding in her stomach to stop. The artist described life in his own country through this performance. The performance was a critique of communism and the oppressive regime in his country (Carlson, 2005). *Lips of Thomas* holds up a mirror to the damaging aspects of the world order while also addressing the human condition in a changing world. Although the cross on which he lies seems to calm and soothe his pain, it has another, more profound connotation. Gil Deleuze said that “God on the cross can be seen as a warning about the curse of life, about escaping from life” (Deleuze, 2006, p. 91). He added, “The rise created by the lashes will lead from the body to the work of art, and from the work of art to ideals” (Deleuze, 2007, p. 23). Marina Abramović’s ritualistic performance can be interpreted as a form of purification ritual.

**Figure 9.** Marina Abramović, *Lips of Thomas*, 1975, Performance Photograph, Two Hours<sup>10</sup>



<sup>10</sup> The images of Marina Abramović’s two-hour performance, *Thomas Lips*, are protected under copyright by the artist herself and the Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. In 1998, an image of the performance was gifted to the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York by Willem Peppler and exhibited at the museum, subsequently being shared on the museum’s official website. The image referenced in this text was obtained from the Guggenheim Museum’s official website and has been used in a limited manner under the principle of “fair use” for purposes of education, critique, or news reporting.



Abramović undergoes a spiritual transformation through her performances, in which she explores her physical and mental limits. In these actions, she has confronted numerous dangers and transcended them. The roots of this immense struggle, as well as the violence she directs toward herself, can be traced back to the chaos of her childhood. Her upbringing was marked by tension, with parents who held high-ranking government positions and a devout grandmother. Although the influences of her parents are clearly reflected in her performances, it was the strict control of Yugoslavia's communist regime that provided the explosive force driving her practice. This imposed domination further ignited her performances. For example, her *Rhythm 5* performance, which was driven by this impulse, took place within a five-pointed wooden star (Figure 10). The star was set on fire, and Abramović lay inside it. As the fire consumed the oxygen, she lost consciousness and was rescued by the audience (Spector, 1994). Marina's performances were initially met with resistance within the art world. She was accused of having lost her mind and of acting irrationally. However, rather than being discouraged, she pursued her practice even more insistently. She adopted an even harsher tone in her discourse and became increasingly audacious in her performances (Bodur, 2022, p. 61).

**Figure 10.** Marina Abramović, *Rhythm 5*, 1974, Performance Photography<sup>11</sup>



---

<sup>11</sup> Images from Marina Abramović's performance *Rhythm 5* are part of the artist's own collection. These images from the performance are exhibited by Sean Kelly Gallery in New York with the artist's permission. This visual has been used

In 1975, during the Charlottenborg Art Festival in Copenhagen, Marina Abramović presented her performance titled *Art Must Be Beautiful, Artist Must Be Beautiful* (Figure 11). She developed the work based on her observations within the residence of family acquaintances in Yugoslavia. At that period, art in Yugoslavia was chiefly associated with the concept of beauty. During her visit, artworks were displayed in a manner that complemented the residence's interior decoration. As a performance artist, Abramović was deeply troubled by the diminution of art to a merely decorative function, serving solely as an embellishment for domestic spaces (Abramović, 2020, p. 103).

When it comes to art, its content should be limitless. Abramović has structured her performances around this very idea. Her one-hour performance, *Art Must Be Beautiful, Artist Must Be Beautiful*, was carried out using a metal brush and a metal comb (Figure 11). Facing the audience, the artist first removed her clothing and then began forcefully combing her hair with the brush and comb she held in her hand. She combed her hair violently until strands were pulled out, inadvertently injuring her face in the process. Clumps of hair were torn away, leaving marks from the comb on her face. Throughout the performance, she repeatedly uttered the words “Art must be beautiful, artist must be beautiful.” By performing ironically while discussing beauty, Marina concluded that the notion of beauty and the idea that art must be beautiful are inherently linked within a conceptual framework. Art, like life, sometimes revolves around beauty and elegance, while at other times it is shaped around violence, suffering, or politics. Beauty alone has never been sufficient for art, because it operates in parallel with life. Whatever exists in life occupies a central place in art as well. The fact that art can be at times confusing and at other times disturbing stems from this very relationship (Bodur, 2022, pp. 83–85).

---

within the limits of the “fair use” principle for educational, critical, or newsworthy content.

**Figure 11.** Marina Abramović, *Art Must Be Beautiful, Artist Must Be Beautiful*, 1975, Performance Photograph, One hour<sup>12</sup>



In the 1970s, Marina Abramović presented her performances as forms of passive-aggressive actions. This approach, constructed around the body, was not solely concerned with violence and pain. She did not execute her performances within short timeframes but extended them over prolonged periods. Consequently, when considering Marina's art, the concepts of time, danger, and violence are intrinsically linked. In the early years of performance art, female artists often used their bodies to critique both art institutions and prevailing notions of beauty. Marina, however, is not a feminist artist, a point she frequently emphasizes in interviews. Nevertheless, as an artist, she has challenged the idea that art and artists must conform to conventional standards of beauty. In one interview, she stated, "If a female artist had worn makeup or nail polish, she would not have been taken seriously enough" (Kim, 2010).

Abramović has performed terrifying performances for a long time. Many of these performances concluded with the audience's intervention. The performances she carried out using her own body also pushed the tolerance limits of those who came to watch her. Her performance, entitled *Balkan Baroque*, also greatly disturbed the

---

<sup>12</sup> Editions and images of Marina Abramović's performance *Art Must Be Beautiful, Artist Must Be Beautiful* are protected under copyright by the artist herself, the Artists Rights Society (ARS), MoMA, and the IMMA Collection (1995). The photograph included in this text was obtained from the official website of the IMMA Collection. The image of Abramović's performance referenced herein has been used in a limited manner under the principle of "fair use" for purposes of education, critique, or news reporting.

audience and was quite difficult to watch (Figure 12). The artist won the Golden Lion award for this performance, which she presented at the 1997 Venice Biennale. In the basement of the gallery, 1,500 kg of bloody beef was placed in a very closed area with minimal air contact. Throughout the performance, Abramović tried to clean the raw and bloody bones with disinfectant. Since the bones were covered in blood, the space was filled with the smell of blood. Many viewers could not tolerate the foul smell and left the gallery before the performance ended. Marina's performance can be interpreted as an attempt to cleanse her life, which occurred amid the communist era and the civil wars. The presence of copper tubs filled with water during the performance also lends support to this idea. Water has been interpreted as a symbol of purification and healing (Güven, 2015). Another perspective is that the artist carries the shameful traces of war. Her actions were aimed at erasing these traces. For four days, she cried while singing folk songs from her childhood in an area where the smell was particularly intense. Sitting on bloody animal bones, the artist was constructed not only through her own past but also through the impact of all wars, primarily the Balkan War. This striking performance represents the impossibility of erasing the traces left by war, violence, and cruelty. This performance, in which the pain experienced by society is palpable, reflects the artist's life. He is an artist who has lived his life on the edge. In an interview, he stated that extremes prevail in the geography where he lives. The artist describes his homeland as "extreme wrongs, extreme violence, extreme feelings." This performance, with its separation of flesh from bone, can also be interpreted as an acceptance of reality and a confrontation with this feeling (Çevik, 2018, p. 839). The artist's mode of production actually stems from his native geography. Extremes and violence have become indispensable in his performance.

"The creative artist manages to reach happiness through pain" (Quoted in Çevik, 2018, p. 838). Marina embraced this sentiment, and traces of this statement can be found throughout her artistic career and performances. The artist incorporated pain into her performances for a long time, exposing both reflections of her own past and her art as a mirror of society through performances that put her in physical danger (Çevik, 2018, p. 838). She reminded us that pain and violence are a reality of the world.

**Figure 12.** Marina Abramović, *Balkan Baroque*, 1997, Performance, Four Days, Seven Hours a Day, Venice Biennale<sup>13</sup>



## Conclusion

Violence, both as an action and a concept, has had a devastating and destructive impact on the depths of life. The elements of power and violence have shaped human history, and the psychological effects that both have had on individuals and societies have transformed art into a vital medium of expression. From the beginning of life, art has encompassed ideologies, the concept of power, violence, and savagery; throughout history, it has transformed its forms of expression in response to changes in

---

<sup>13</sup> Marina Abramović presented her performance titled *Balkan Baroque*, for which she received the “Golden Lion” award in 1997, at the Venice Biennale. Although the performance took place within the scope of the biennale, editions of it are included in numerous collections. Original footage of the performance is held by the Sean Kelly Gallery in New York, a private collection in the Netherlands and Italy, Christie's South Kensington in London (April 2, 2008), and the Massimo Minini Gallery in Brescia, Italy. In addition to being held in numerous collections, the rights are reserved by both the artist and the Artists Rights Society (ARS) in New York. The photograph included in the text was arranged as part of an exhibition organized by MoMA. In this exhibition, where the original video of the performance was not shown, the arrangement utilized the bones and visuals that contribute to the main idea of the performance. The image, published on MoMA's official website with the artist's and Sean Kelly Gallery's special permission, is included in the text. The artwork image can also be accessed from the source K. Stiles, K. Biesenbach, C. Iles, Marina Abramović, New York 2008, p. 158 (another color print, pp. 32-33). This image, taken from MoMA's official website, has been used within the limits of the “fair use” principle in content that has educational, critical, or news value.

power mechanisms. This transformation has occurred not only at the formal level but also within the layers of meaning in art.

Many artists have embraced the idea that art serving any purpose would undermine its freedom. Nevertheless, wars, conflicts, genocides, and mass destruction have similarly driven art into a harsher and more brutal production process. Movements such as Surrealism, Futurism, and Dada developed innovative approaches to art production during these periods. Art, like life itself, encompasses all the complexity of existence. Therefore, evaluating art in isolation from life also makes it difficult to understand.

The concepts of power and authority, as one of the world's most significant problems, have been constantly addressed in art throughout history. Starting in the 1960s, liberated artists began to address violence, social issues, and the imposition of power in a bold manner. They produced works that were striking enough to cause discomfort in the viewer. This approach aimed to foster social questioning and liberate artists from the pain in their own lives, based on the idea that art cannot be detached from the realities of life. In this regard, Marina Abramović stands out as a figure who grew up under individual and social pressures. She embraced art as a means of liberation, using it to escape restrictive conditions. With her courage, the artist has become one of the important names in art history. Abramović's art questions social dynamics and the power structure of her homeland through her body. Although her performances stem from her personal experiences and the geography of her birthplace, her work reveals the universality of violence and oppression. Themes such as impositions, restrictions, power, and violence are presented in a language that everyone who follows her can understand.

Artist Marina Abramović addresses social violence in her performances, transforming the audience from observers into active participants. By sometimes positioning the audience as perpetrators, she reveals their capacity for intervention or passivity. Abramović's performances directly confront and test the audience's ethical boundaries by making their decisions critical to the outcome. Rather than merely representing violence, she uses it to create consequential experiences in which audience choices (whether to intervene or participate) actively shape or

restrain violence. Ultimately, Abramović's work establishes an aesthetic and political space defined by the agency and ethical decisions of the audience, not the artist. The viewer is positioned both to expose the potential for violence and to set its limits.

The fundamental defining characteristics of Abramović's art are her persistent pushing of art's boundaries, both physical and conceptual. While positioning her body as a field of research, the artist also makes visible limiting concepts such as endurance, sensitivity, pain, and tolerance. By categorizing the concept of boundaries, the artist invites the viewer to share in this experience. In this process, the distinctions between art and life, body and action, artist and viewer become blurred. Marina's transcendence of boundaries is not only physical but also a reality. The question of where art begins and ends creates a threshold area for the viewer, one that is both unsettling and thought-provoking.

Abramović has produced performances that reveal the dark sides of human nature. These works have had a profound impact on viewers. Thanks to their multi-layered structure, they allow viewers to draw different conclusions. Ultimately, artists express their inner worlds while taking a stand against social norms. From the earliest examples of art to contemporary productions, art has been seen to address social problems, the deeper aspects of humanity, and historical realities. Therefore, art is essentially a social production process, drawing its fundamental basis from society itself.

### References

- Abramović, M. (2020). *Duvarlardan Geçmek*. [Walking through Walls] (D. A. Balcı, Trans.) İstanbul: Everest Yayınları.
- Antmen, A. (2014). 20. Yüzyıl Batı Sanat Akımları. [20th Century Western Art Movements] İstanbul: Sel Yayıncılık.
- Artun, A. (2003). *Kuramda Avangardlar ve Bürger'in Avangard Kuramı*. [Avant-Gardes in Theory and Bürger's Theory of the Avant-Garde] Retrieved January 7, 2025, from <https://aliartun.com/yazilar/kuramda-avangardlar-ve-burgerin-avangard-kurami/>.
- Aydemir, S. (2018). *Gina Pane'in Performanslarında Nesneleşen Acı*. [The Pain Objectified in Gina Pane's Performances]

- Tykhe Sanat ve Tasarım Dergisi, 3(5), 295-307.  
<https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/1175284>
- Bodur, Ö. (2022). Performans Sanatında Beden ve Marina Abramović Örneği. [The Body in Performance Art: The Case of Marina Abramović] Kütahya Dumlupınar University Graduate School of Education Department of Art and Design Unpublished Master's Thesis.
- Can, G. Ş. (2018). Şiddet ve Sanatsal Yaratı. [Violence and Artistic Creation] The Journal of Academic Social Science Studies, (66), 211-212, Doi number: <http://dx.doi.org/10.9761/JASSS7510>  
[https://jasstudies.com/?mod=tammetin&makaleadi=&makaleurl=1775361881\\_17-Dr.%20%C3%96%C4%9Fr.%20%C3%9Cyes%C3%B6k%C3%A7en%C5%9Eahmaran%20Can.pdf&key=28684](https://jasstudies.com/?mod=tammetin&makaleadi=&makaleurl=1775361881_17-Dr.%20%C3%96%C4%9Fr.%20%C3%9Cyes%C3%B6k%C3%A7en%C5%9Eahmaran%20Can.pdf&key=28684).
- Carlson, M. (2005). Marina Abramović Repeats: Pain, Art, and Theater. Retrieved from <http://www.hotreview.org/articles/marinaabram.htm>
- Cioran, E. M. (2000). Çürümenin Kitabı. [A Short History of Decay] (H. Bayrı, Trans.) İstanbul: Metis.
- Çalışkan, S. (2019). Katliamlara Tanıklık: Sanat Esrleri Aracılığı İle Hatırlamak. [Witnessing the Massacres: Remembering Through the Works of Art] Güzel Sanatlar Enstitüsü Dergisi (43), 105-114. Doi Number: <https://doi.org/10.32547/ataunigsed.564681>  
<https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/841671>
- Çevik, N. (2018). Savaşlardan Sonra Çağdaş Sanattan Bize Kalan Duygu. [After Wars the Emotion Remaining to us From Contemporary Art] İdil, 7(47), 837-840. Doi Number: 10.7816 /idil-07-47-08  
<https://www.idildergisi.com/makale/pdf/1531988842.pdf>
- Deleuze, G. (2006). Nietzsche. (İ. Karadağ, Trans.) İstanbul: Otonom.
- Deleuze, G. (2007). Sacher-Masoch Takdimi. [Presentation of Sacher-Masoch] (İ. Uysal, Trans.) İstanbul: Norgunk.
- Derin, Ö. (2017). İtici Bir Güç Olarak Oluşsal Şiddet. [Existential Violence as a Repulsive Power] Felsefe ve Sosyal Bilimler



- Dergisi, Güz (24), 317-335.  
<https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/804401>
- Gökgöz, Z. (2023). Duchamp ve Mitsel Söylem. [Duchamp and Mythical Discourse] Ardahan Üniversitesi İnsani Bilimler ve Edebiyat Fakültesi Dergisi (Special Issue), 371-382.  
<https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/2843638>
- Güven, M. (2015, April). Yugoslavya'nın Çığlığı; Marina Abramović. [The Cry of Yugoslavia; Marina Abramović] Başkent Üniversitesi 2. Sanat ve Tasarım Eğitimi Sempozyumu Disiplinlerarası Tasarım/ Bildiriler Kitabı, 182-186.  
[https://imc.baskent.edu.tr/kw/upload/232/dosyalar/bildiri\\_kitap\\_2015.compressed\\_v1.pdf?birim=232&menu\\_id=30](https://imc.baskent.edu.tr/kw/upload/232/dosyalar/bildiri_kitap_2015.compressed_v1.pdf?birim=232&menu_id=30)
- Keskin, F. (1996). Foucault'da Şiddet ve İktidar. [Violence and Power in Foucault] Cogito, 117, 122.  
<https://www.scribd.com/doc/116706825/Ferda-Keskin-%C5%9Eiddet-Ve-%C4%B0ktidar-Foucault>
- Keten, H. (2019). Çağdaş Sanatta Şiddet Olgusunun Güncelliği Üzerine Bir Değerlendirme. [An Evaluation of “The Actuality of the Fact of Violence” in Contemporary Art] The Journal of Social Sciences, SOBİDER, 3(8), 235-253.  
[https://sobider.com/?mod=tammetin&makaleadi=&makaleurl=260546721\\_280Hat%20ice%20KETEN.pdf&key=31118](https://sobider.com/?mod=tammetin&makaleadi=&makaleurl=260546721_280Hat%20ice%20KETEN.pdf&key=31118)
- Kılıç, A. G. (2023). Beden Üzerine Bir Çalışma: Performans Sanatı “Marina Abramović”. [A Study on the Body in Art: Performance Art “Marina Abramović”] Haliç Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi, 6(1), 135-161. Doi Number: <https://doi.org/10.56206/husbd.1230621>  
<https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/2876993>
- Kim, H. (2010, April 6). Listening to Marina Abramović: Art Must Be Beautiful; Artist Must Be Beautiful. Retrieved from [https://www.moma.org/explore/inside\\_out/2010/04/06/listening-to-marina-abramovic-art-must-be-beautiful-artist-must-be-beautiful/](https://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2010/04/06/listening-to-marina-abramovic-art-must-be-beautiful-artist-must-be-beautiful/)
- Korkmaz, F. D., & Kobat, O. (2019). Viyana Aksiyonizmi ve Deneyisel Avrupa Sinema Etkileri. [Vienna Actionism and Effects on Experimental European Cinema] Eskişehir Osmangazi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, 20(1), 123-142. Doi

- Number: <https://doi.org/10.17494/ogusbd.595137>  
<https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/767457>
- Korkmaz, F. D. (August 28, 2025). On Art. (L. H. Karadağ, Interviewer)
- Lynton, N. (1989). Modern Sanatın Öykü. [The Story of Modern Art] (C. Çapan, Trans.) İstanbul: Remzi Kitabevi.
- Martinez, E. H., & Demiral, A. (2014). 20. ve 21. YY.da Sanatta Malzeme Olarak Beden; Performans Sanatı. [Body as a Material in Art in the 20th-21st Centuries: Performance Art] *Art and Design Journal*, 6(6), 180–201. Doi Number: <https://doi.org/10.20488/austd.96090>  
<https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/192486>
- Ötgün, C. (2008). Sanatın Şiddeti ve Sınırları. [The Violence and the Limits of Art] *Sanat ve Tasarım Dergisi*, 1(1), 90-103. Doi Number: <https://doi.org/10.18603/std.76398>  
<https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/192619>
- Özaras, M. E. (2021, October). Beden Sanatında Fiziksel Acı ve Mazozizm İlişkisi. [The Relation of Physical Pain and Masochism in Body Art] *The Journal of Social Sciences, Akademik Sosyal Araştırmalar Dergisi*, 8(54), 503-514. Doi Number: 10.29228/SOBIDER.52870  
<https://sobider.com/?mod=tammetin&makaleadi=&makaleurl=b92ccefb-dcf5-4f65-8a50-74d6fded36ae.pdf&key=52870>
- Özayten, N. (1997). Gösteri Sanatı. [Performing Arts] İstanbul: Yapı Endüstri Merkezi Yayınları: Eczacıbaşı Sanat Ansiklopedi 2.
- Özınan, E. (2017). Erika Fischer-Lichte'nin Performans Anlayışı ile Marina Abramović'in Rhythm Serisine Bakmak. [Looking at Marina Abramović's Rhythm Series with the Performance Understanding of Erika Fischer-Lichte] *Uluslararası Müzik ve Sahne Sanatları Dergisi UMSSD*, 1(1), 11-26.  
<https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/435447>
- Sayan, Ş. (2016, Autumn). Sanatta Acı ve Şiddet Eylemleri. [Tendency to Pain and Violence in Art] *Electronic Journal of Social Sciences*, 15(59), 1421–1430. Doi Number: 10.17755/esosder.57328  
<https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/229769>
- Spector, N. (1994). Marina Abramović Rhythm. Retrieved from <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/5190>

- Sürmeli, K. (2012). Dada Hareketinden Kavramsal Sanata. [From Dada Movement to Conceptual Art]. *Inonu University Journal of Art and Design*, 2(6), 337-345. <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/799475>
- Şahinbaş, U., Türker, İ. H., & Ağçıçek, M. (2019, Winter). Savaşlar ve Ölümler Çağında Bir Kadın Sanatçı Kathe Kollwitz. [A Woman in the Age of War and Death: Kathe Kollwitz] *Journal of Art, Design and Science*, 4(8), 160-171. Doi Number: 10.34189/asd.4.8.011 <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/909581>
- Şenel, E. (2015). Performans Sanatları ve Sanatçının Anlatım Aracı Olarak Beden. [Performing Arts and the Body as Means of Expression of the Artist] *İdil*, 4(16), 161-182. <https://www.idildergisi.com/makale/pdf/1430253549.pdf>
- Yayan, G., & Gök, T. (2020). Performans Sanatı ve Marina Abramović. [Performance Art and Marina Abramović] *Asos Journal the Journal of Academic Social Science*, 8(106), 390-401. Doi Number: 10.29228/ASOS.43622 <https://asosjournal.com/?mod=tammetin&makaleadi=&makaleurl=7080b7ca-031c-49d6-89ad-e131be1746d7.pdf&key=43622>
- Yılmaz, M. (2012). Tuvalden Sahneye Fırlayan Şiddet. [Violence Leaping from Canvas to Stage] *Sanatın Günceli Güncelin Sanatı*, 257-272.
- Yılmaz, M. (2013). Moderninden Postmoderne Sanat. [Art from Modern to Postmodern] Ankara: Ütopya Sanat Dizisi.
- Yorulmaz, A. (2024). Lacancı Psikanaliz ve Queer Teori Kesişimselliğinde Beden: Marina Abramović'in Performans Sanatı ve "Rhythm 0" Örneği Örneği. [Body in the Intersectionality of Lacanian Psychoanalysis and Queer Theory: Marina Abramović's Performance Art and the Example of "Rhythm 0"] *Beykoz Akademi Dergisi (Special Issue)*, 219-232. Doi Number: 10.14514/beykozad.1369593 <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/3447332>
- Yönsel, M. (2021, December). Gottfried Helnwein'in Eserlerinde Şiddetin Masum Yüzü. [In the Artworks of Gottfried Helnwein: The Innocent Face of Violence] *İnternational Journal of Social, Humanities and Administrative Sciences*, 7(47), 2588 - 2596.

## Figure References

**Figure 1.** Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, 1612–1613, (O/C), 158,8 cm x 125,5 cm  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Judith\\_Slaying\\_Holofernes\\_\(Artemisia\\_Gentileschi,\\_Naples\)#/media/File:Artemisia\\_Gentileschi\\_-\\_Judith\\_Beheading\\_Holofernes\\_-\\_WGA8563.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Judith_Slaying_Holofernes_(Artemisia_Gentileschi,_Naples)#/media/File:Artemisia_Gentileschi_-_Judith_Beheading_Holofernes_-_WGA8563.jpg)

**Figure 2.** Francisco Goya, *The Third of May 1808*, 1814, (O/C), 268 cm x 347 cm  
[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/f/fd/El\\_Tres\\_de\\_Mayo%2C\\_by\\_Francisco\\_de\\_Goya%2C\\_from\\_Prado\\_thin\\_black\\_margin.jpg/960px-El\\_Tres\\_de\\_Mayo%2C\\_by\\_Francisco\\_de\\_Goya%2C\\_from\\_Prado\\_thin\\_black\\_margin.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/f/fd/El_Tres_de_Mayo%2C_by_Francisco_de_Goya%2C_from_Prado_thin_black_margin.jpg/960px-El_Tres_de_Mayo%2C_by_Francisco_de_Goya%2C_from_Prado_thin_black_margin.jpg)

**Figure 3.** Pablo Picasso, *Guernica*, 1937, (O/C), 349 cm x 776 cm  
[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/tr/7/7f/Picasso\\_Guernica.jpg?20081014201323](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/tr/7/7f/Picasso_Guernica.jpg?20081014201323)

**Figure 4.** Kathe Kollwitz, *Ein Weberaufstand: Need*, 1893-1894, Lithograph  
[https://media.mutualart.com/Images/2012\\_10/17/01/013939432/aa2a7b14-ea4e-4257-b904-f004aaa0ae20\\_338.Jpeg](https://media.mutualart.com/Images/2012_10/17/01/013939432/aa2a7b14-ea4e-4257-b904-f004aaa0ae20_338.Jpeg)

**Figure 5.** Anselm Kiefer, *Dein Goldenes Haar, Margarethe* 1981, (M/M on canvas), 130 cm x 170 cm  
<https://www.artchive.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Your-Golden-Hair-Margarete-Kiefer-Anselm-1981.jpg>

**Figure 6.** Hermann Nitsch, *Orgy Mystery Theater*, 6 Day Performance 2022  
[https://simskultur.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Hermann-Nitsch-das-Orgien-Mysterien-Theater-6-Tage-Spiel-2022-Bild-4-c-Hermann-Nitsch-GmbH-Foto\\_FEYERL.jpg](https://simskultur.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Hermann-Nitsch-das-Orgien-Mysterien-Theater-6-Tage-Spiel-2022-Bild-4-c-Hermann-Nitsch-GmbH-Foto_FEYERL.jpg)

**Figure 7.** Marina Abramović, *Rhythm 10*, 1973 Performance Photograph  
[https://lisson-art.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/attachment/image/body/11265/ABRA730001\\_10\\_22\\_Book.jpg](https://lisson-art.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/attachment/image/body/11265/ABRA730001_10_22_Book.jpg)

**Figure 8.** Marina Abramović, *Rhythm 0*, 1974. Performance, Six hours  
<https://saltonline.org/directus/media/thumbnails/1440-jpg-780-5000-false.jpg>

**Figure 9.** Marina Abramović, *Lips of Thomas*, 1975, Performance, Two Hours  
[https://www.guggenheim.org/wp-content/uploads/1975/01/98.5210\\_ph\\_web-1.jpg](https://www.guggenheim.org/wp-content/uploads/1975/01/98.5210_ph_web-1.jpg)

**Figure 10.** Marina Abramović, *Rhythm 5*, 1974, Performance Photography <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/marina-abramovic-rhythm-5-4>

**Figure 11.** Marina Abramović, *Art Must Be Beautiful, Artist Must Be Beautiful*, 1975, Performance, One hour <https://imma.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/6066.jpg>

**Figure 12.** Marina Abramović, *Balkan Baroque*, 1997, Performance, Four Days, Seven Hours a Day, Venice Biennale <https://www.moma.org/d/assets/W1siZiIsIjIwMTgyMTAvMzEvOWx4dndtOGM0dV80MjYyMi5qcGciXSxbInAilCJjb252ZXJ0IiwilXFlYWxpdkHkgOTAgLXJlc2l6ZSAyMDAwedIiwMDBcdTAwM2UiXV0/42622.jpg?sha=63c65a65ec218f9d>

### Author Biography

Laçin Hazal Karadağ was born in Eskişehir in 1990. She graduated from Anadolu University, Faculty of Fine Arts, Department of Painting, in 2018, achieving the distinction of High Honor Student. In 2022, she completed her master's degree at Eskişehir Osmangazi University, Institute of Social Sciences, Department of Art and Design, with her thesis entitled *Reflections of Eastern Culture in Contemporary Art: Orientalist Art*. In 2024, she was accepted into the PhD/Proficiency in Art program at the same institution.

Pursuing her artistic production alongside academic research, Karadağ has participated in numerous group exhibitions, curated and organized several exhibitions, and held two solo exhibitions. She continues her academic and artistic work in Eskişehir.

For correspondence: [karadaglacinhazal@gmail.com](mailto:karadaglacinhazal@gmail.com)

## CHAPTER 4

### Reading Gender Issues in Jenny Saville's Paintings

Funda SALT

#### Introduction

Feminist art “Originated as a collective movement advocating for women's rights in the mid-19th century across America and Europe. It is founded on women's struggles for the right to live freely, to vote, and to participate in education and governance” (Kılıç Gündüz, 2023, p. 43). Historically, women's identities have been shaped under male dominance within the art world, and women artists have often been regarded as second-class practitioners. Consequently, feminist art has emerged to promote and support works that challenge societal norms and prejudices. While early-generation feminist artists concentrated on the *biological characteristics* of the female body, subsequent generations focused on critically examining the *cultural codes* imposed on the body (Antmen, 2013, p. 242; Cebeci & Gökova, 2024, pp. 47-50).

Feminist art, “While challenging patriarchal thought structures, has concentrated on gender and gender distinctions since the 1980s”. Similarly, feminist art examines the concepts of gender not solely in terms of biological differences but also from historical, cultural, and ideological perspectives. Contemporary feminist thought originates from the notion that woman is not a fixed and universal reality, but rather a socially constructed one (Öz & Aksel, 2024, p. 134). In this context, scholars such as Judith Butler, Simone de Beauvoir, and Luce Irigaray have proposed innovative perspectives on the nature, formation, and representation of gender. This study analyzes the approaches of these thinkers concerning the concept of gender through a comparative methodology, grounded in Jenny Saville's artistic understanding.

Judith Butler conceptualizes gender not as a purely biological phenomenon but as a social construct. According to Butler, the differentiation between sex and gender engenders binary oppositions, and this differentiation is continually reproduced through normative frameworks. Butler contends that this differentiation is embodied. She further emphasizes that the biological body is inseparable from the social body, which is a societal construct. Butler affirms that women are the most vulnerable within society and are perpetually victims of othering (Öz & Aksel,

2024, p. 136). This perspective has prompted a re-evaluation of the notion of the subject. Butler's approach marks a pivotal moment in feminist theory and offers a critique of essentialist perspectives.

Simone de Beauvoir, in her book *The Second Sex*, emerged as a pioneer of 20th-century gender theory with her assertion that, *one is not born, but instead becomes, a woman*. According to de Beauvoir, women are shaped by historical and cultural circumstances. Within a society characterized by a male-centered structure, women are positioned as the other. De Beauvoir emphasized that women must critically question social norms in order to transition from a passive role to that of an active subject. Historically, women's bodies have been objectified and rendered uncontrollable, and by integrating the notions of freedom and existentialism into the female experience, de Beauvoir laid a significant conceptual foundation for feminist theory (Aydınalp, 2020, pp. 472-473).

Luce Irigaray has formulated a feminist critique grounded in psychoanalysis and linguistic philosophy. According to Irigaray, Western intellectual tradition is organized through a masculine language framework, within which women are depicted either as lacking or as the *other*. She critically examines the perspectives of psychoanalysts such as Freud and Lacan, highlighting the absence of womanhood in linguistic structures. Irigaray asserts that women have been effectively silenced within this masculine symbolic order and advocates for the development of a new discourse capable of acknowledging and representing women's differences. By transcending the existing linguistic paradigms, she aims to construct a language that accommodates multiple and fluid interpretations related to the female body (Delice, 2022, pp. 133-134).

Jenny Saville is among the artists who, through bodily signs, articulate the dominance exerted by mechanisms of power and consumer society over individuals, rendering visible identities positioned as others within her artwork. Although the notion of the other is often linked to female identity within a social framework, Saville explores this relationship in her paintings through the emotional and ethical stances she develops with women. While the artistic process is not invariably regarded as a purely individual phenomenon, Saville's oeuvre emphasizes a sensitivity to social concerns and the visual expression of such sensitivity.

## **Jenny Saville and the Concept of Art**

Jenny Saville was born on May 7, 1970, in Cambridge, England. Raised in an academic family, Saville was encouraged by her family to think and work diligently. Saville developed an interest in painting at the age of eight, and upon her mother's recognition of her talent, a dedicated studio was established within their residence. Her uncle, Paul Saville, played a significant role in her development. The artist completed her undergraduate studies at the Glasgow School of Art in 1992. During her time at art school, Saville's work and reputation began to garner recognition. He emphasized the importance of consistency, regular effort, and perseverance, reminding himself daily that success in art required continual effort. She was awarded a six-month scholarship to study at the University of Cincinnati in the United States (Lincheap, n.d.). During her scholarship period, Saville immersed herself in American culture, observing prominent, white female figures in T-shirts and shorts in her surroundings. She witnessed individuals embracing their bodies as they were, an observation that significantly influenced her artistic perspective. This was identified as one of the pivotal moments in her artistic development (Tümer, 2023).

Jenny Saville references Classical period artists in the production process of her works. She has been influenced by paintings such as Rembrandt's *Woman Bathing in the River*, Diego Velázquez's *The Pope*, and Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam*. She has analyzed and reflected on the technique and figure-focused works of classical art in her own art. At the Royal Academy in London, she was influenced by Rembrandt's painting *The Hanged Ox* and turned her attention to the desire to create bodies. Saville uses various techniques such as photography, charcoal, watercolor, oil paint, and printing techniques mounted on plexiglass. The artist uses abundant lines to narrate movement, time, and the changing and transforming states of the body (Renkçi, 2014, p. 139). Saville also experiments with tones to find the skin color she desires, thus achieving a wide range of light and dark tones for a single color. The artist also applies oil painting techniques in her art, in the style characteristic of Classical period painters.

Saville became fascinated with the nature of plastic surgery, which gained widespread popularity in the mid-1990s, and commenced observation of surgical procedures at a plastic surgeon's office in New York. He developed imagery centered around liposuction, cosmetic surgery, and gender reassignment. Saville



conceptualized these images through observation, experience, photographs, and sketches. “The artist stated that he never regarded himself as a photographer, but rather utilized photography to systematically document information for his paintings, comparing it to sketching and note-taking in his artistic process” (Renkçi, 2014, p. 141). The foundation of Saville's exploration of the human form is rooted in Leonardo da Vinci, who studied anatomy within art history and produced illustrations accordingly. Da Vinci's research signifies a crucial intersection between art and science. Saville presents a traditional perspective of the human figure through his distinctive style.

Art collector and advertising executive Charles Saatchi is an important figure in Jenny Saville's rise in the art world and a turning point in her career. The Saatchi Gallery agreed to purchase and display Saville's paintings and offered her an 18-month contract to paint. Although her exhibitions were mainly concentrated in New York, she said that being a painter in the US felt less like a crime, even though she admired American painters and British contemporaries. Her works caused controversy in the UK, but Saville kept creating art regardless of being seen as inappropriate (Lincheap, n.d.).

### **Reading Gender Issues in Jenny Saville's Paintings**

Judith Butler articulates that gender is a social construct produced by mechanisms of social power; that human subjects are subsequently ascribed the genders of male and female; and that the relationship between gender and sexuality is consequently fixed at a particular point. She further contends that the mechanisms of naming employed by power to shape and gender subjects are rooted in the body. Moreover, she asserts that individuals whose existence depends on the legal regulations imposed by others from birth are inherently vulnerable in relation to others. She also emphasizes that vulnerability within society predominantly affects women and that women are consistently regarded as the *other* (Öz & Aksel, 2024, pp. 135-136). Saville's images, with their surface distortions and exaggerated bodies, can be read not only as aesthetic but also as metaphors for social violence. Butler's concept of the fragility of the body also strengthens the interpretability of these images. Butler argues that the body cannot exist on its own, that it is dependent on social norms, and that it exhibits fragility both physically and

psychologically. Saville's female bodies are concrete manifestations of social fragility.

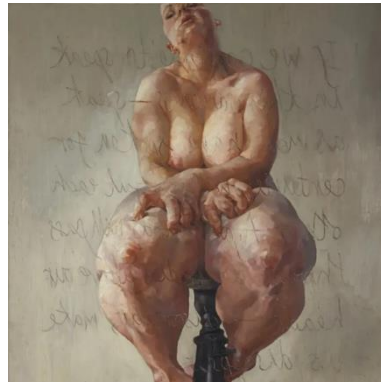
In this context, Jenny Saville's figurative paintings, particularly with their forms that disrupt idealized perceptions of the female body, reveal how gender is socially constructed. Saville's representations of bodies, which could be described as non-ideal, heavy, exaggerated, or flawed, are powerful visual examples that embody Butler's questioning of the naturalness of gender. In Saville's works, bodies are neither conforming to aesthetic norms nor eroticized. On the contrary, they are raw, fragmented, and uninhibited bodies that may disturb the viewer. When Butler's approach, which questions the legibility of bodies, is combined with Saville's work, a radical form of resistance against the visual representation of gender emerges. These bodies are not merely displayed; they also challenge imposed norms of femininity and beauty, exposing the instability of gender. Therefore, Saville's paintings can be seen as reflections of Butler's performative gender theory on the aesthetic plane (Tümer, 2023).

According to Simone De Beauvoir, women were not entirely free within the patriarchal structure and were classified as passive, inactive, and objectified as the other (Aydinalp, 2020, p. 478). In this context, Jenny Saville's large-scale self-portraits, which center on the deformations of the female body, are noteworthy. These works create a visual language that aims to disrupt the social perspective emphasized by Beauvoir. Saville's paintings represent the female body in all its reality, returning the representation of the subject to the woman herself. In this respect, Saville produces a visual counterpart to Beauvoir's feminist thought, which opposes women's otherness.

According to Luce Irigaray, Western thought positions the masculine at the center in fields such as religion, philosophy, and art, while placing the feminine in a secondary position. This idea portrays women as mirrors in the creation of men as subjects, positioning them as the other (Delice, 2022, pp. 133-134). Irigaray's assertion that female sexuality is plural, dispersed, and centerless finds its counterpart in Saville's representations of bodies with vague, fragmented boundaries, created through layered paint textures. In Saville's paintings, the body is non-ideal, liberated, and resists normative gender perceptions. Saville's perception of the body can be interpreted as a visual expression of Irigaray's proposed female existence.

As an artist who critically examines aesthetic portrayals of masculine and sexual power, Jenny Saville incorporates images of the body, characterized as flawed by social norms, into her paintings. In this context, her work fosters heightened sensitivity towards and elucidates the visual politics surrounding the body, which are often confined to ideals of beauty and consumption (Mattei, 2024). The aesthetic procedures and surgeries popularized by contemporary life transform into a space of psychological and physical trauma on Saville's canvas. Concurrently, reflections of the psychological impressions created by the spiritual pressure imposed on the body by society can be observed in his paintings. Saville depicts bodies that are glorified beyond traditional perceptions, alongside themes of eating disorders, harmful diets, and the increase in cosmetic and aesthetic surgeries. In Saville's works, figures serve as a means of engaging with social issues (Renkçi, 2014, p. 141).

**Figure 1.** Jenny Saville, *Propped*, 1992, (O/C), 213,4 cm x 182,9 cm<sup>1</sup>



In Jenny Saville's painting titled *Propped*, a corpulent woman is depicted seated steadily on a high stool (Figure 1). She has tilted her head backward and has encircled her legs with her hands in a claw-like manner. This painting is also among her works that confront the idealized portrayal of women in art history and society's perception of beauty and taste.

---

<sup>1</sup> Jenny Saville's 1992 work titled *Propped* is part of a private collection. This image, taken from Sotheby's official website and used in the text, has been used on a limited basis within the framework of the "fair use" principle for content with educational, critical, or news value.

The image displays text written in reverse, comprising quotations from the feminist Bulgarian author Luce Irigaray. Saville asserts that if we persist in speaking in this mirrored manner, mimicking the speech patterns of men for centuries, we will ultimately fail each other again, suggesting that it is men's discourse that predominantly influences women. Additionally, Saville employs these discourses to demonstrate how, through textual representation, women's bodies are initially filled and subsequently destroyed. This image is positioned opposite a mirror of identical dimensions, with the mirror's symbolism representing justice and the judicial system. The artist questions whether justice exists in the space between the painting and the mirror (Cebeci & Gökova, 2024, pp. 53-54). A female figure is at the center of Saville's painting, *Propped*. The artist explores issues of the body, sex, and gender through a feminist lens, exploring female identity. She explores the portrayal of the female body as ideal and beautiful throughout art history, often through the lens of overweight bodies, which are often portrayed as exaggerated and flawed. This work offers a powerful visual language that contributes to both body politics and gender studies.

**Figure 2.** Jenny Saville, *Closed Contact*, 1995-1996, C-print Mounted in Plexiglass, 182,9 cm x 182,9 cm x 15,2 cm<sup>2</sup>



---

<sup>2</sup> Jenny Saville's work titled *Closed Contact* has been purchased by the Gagosian Gallery in Beverly Hills and added to its collection. The usage rights of the work are protected by the artist and the gallery. This visual used in the text has been used on a limited basis within the framework of the "fair use" principle for content that carries educational, critical, or news value.

In Jenny Saville's painting *Closed Contact*, which employs herself as the model, a body that is both physically and psychologically restricted is portrayed (Figure 2). The body appears to be in a state of chaos, embodying a complex mixture of emotions such as fear, sadness, and violence. The distance between the viewer and the body is equivalent to the thickness of the glass employed in the artist's technique. The compressed body serves not only as a physical image but also as a manifestation of the spiritual expressions of societal-imposed meanings on the body. The texture of the skin, along with the violence and pain conveyed by the body's shriveled appearance, is depicted with the utmost detail (Blythe, 2021; Rençi, 2014, p. 145). Saville's painting, *Closed Contact*, offers a concrete representation of an individual's internal and social state of confinement through the body. It is one of the works that clearly demonstrates how women's identities are limited and constrained by society's rules, expectations, and norms. This work questions how the female body, suppressed by society, has become incommunicative.

**Figure 3.** Jenny Saville, *Fulcrum*, 1998-99, (O/C), 261,6 cm x 487,7 cm<sup>3</sup>



This particular work by Jenny Saville exemplifies her transition from depicting solitary figures to portraying multiple figures (Figure 3). The individual figure has been rendered indistinctly. Male and female bodies are intertwined, and the

---

<sup>3</sup> The copyright for Jenny Saville's work titled *Fulcrum* belongs to the artist. This work by the artist is exhibited on the official website of the Gagosian Gallery. The image used in this text has been used on a limited basis within the framework of the "fair use" principle for content that carries educational, critical, or news value.

blending of forms conveys a sense of timelessness. Through this approach, Saville dissolves traditional notions of gender identity. While the precise boundaries of the bodies are ambiguous, the composition presents a horizontally compressed depiction of flesh (Cebeci & Gökova, 2024, p. 56). Saville's painting, *Fulcrum*, demonstrates a shift towards a multi-figurative approach. In this work, Saville combines figurative and abstract concepts, offering the viewer a unique experience. He emphasizes resistance, empowerment, and reconstruction through gender and the body. This work reveals the complex dynamics between the body's endurance and strength and its resistance to social norms. Furthermore, the work is impactful both aesthetically and conceptually.

**Figure 4.** Edouard Manet, *Olympia*, 1863, (O/C), 130,5 cm x 191 cm<sup>4</sup>



Manet's work *Olympia* is considered by some art critics to be the beginning of Modernism due to its thematic and formal breaks. Manet named this work after a goddess. The figure, positioned as a prostitute in the work, offers the viewer an inviting gaze. Jenny Saville critiques the perspective on the female image in art history by adopting an appropriation approach. Saville reinterprets the presentation of the female body as a sexual object through the theme of male-female relationships. In her painting *Mirror*, she creates a

---

<sup>4</sup> Edouard Manet's works are now in the public domain, as he passed away in 1883. Manet's 1863 painting *Olympia* is currently part of the collection at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris and is on display there. The image included in the text was taken from the official website of the Musée d'Orsay. This image used in the text has been used on a limited basis within the framework of the "fair use" principle for content that has educational, critical, or news value.

mirror effect by placing a male figure in the exact reclining position as the female figure in her work *Olympia* (Figure 4). The female and male figures are intertwined.

**Figure 5.** Jenny Saville, *Mirror*, 2011-12, Charcoal on canvas, 33,5 cm x 55 cm<sup>5</sup>



Saville's painting, *Mirror*, with its reference to *Olympia* and contemporary interpretation, introduces a novel and resilient perspective on issues of gender and the body (Figure 5). This artwork significantly contributes to a thorough and critical examination of themes related to the body and gender by synthesizing the endeavors of women's bodies to liberate, empower, and redefine themselves with elements of resistance to social norms and subjective opposition through art.

Saville approaches motherhood within the realm of contemporary art through adherence to traditional codes. She perceives motherhood as a constraining factor for female artists engaged in their practice. Consequently, many female artists have been compelled to choose between motherhood and their artistic pursuits. Saville, who did not encounter this dilemma, continued to integrate her personal experiences of motherhood into her artwork. She has demonstrated that societal perceptions of the body can transcend conventional norms, illustrating that the human body possesses potential beyond traditional understanding (Tümer, 2023).

---

<sup>5</sup> Jenny Saville's work titled *Mirror* is part of the collection at the Gagosian Gallery in New York. This visual used in the text has been used within the limits of the "fair use" principle for educational, critical, or newsworthy content.

**Figure 6.** Leonardo Da Vinci, *Virgin and Child with St. Anne and the Infant St. John the Baptist (Burlington House Cartoon)*, 1507, Pen and Ink on Paper, 141,5 cm x 104,6 cm<sup>6</sup>



Jenny Saville references paintings of the Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ, which constitute the genesis of the theme of motherhood in Western art (Figure 6). Saville approaches her work, *Virgin and Child with St. Anne and the Infant St. John the Baptist* (referred to as the *Burlington House Cartoon*), with a foundational perspective, presenting an image of an imperfect mother (Figure 7). She substitutes Jesus Christ with juvenile figures rendered in her distinctive style. In the history of art, she juxtaposes the idealized, flawless, and sacred depiction of motherhood with the contemporary understanding of the mother as sacred yet imperfect and enduring struggles. While explicitly illustrating the evolving and transforming female body post-childbirth, she also conveys the passage of time and movement through her use of lines (Menteşoğlu Chatzoudas, 2021, p. 62).

When Saville's theme of motherhood is considered through gender and the body, this work demonstrates that the female body is a complex space shaped by social expectations, individual experiences, and biological realities. At this intersection of family, society, and biology, the artist emphasizes the multilayered nature of

---

<sup>6</sup> Leonardo da Vinci's work titled *Virgin and Child with St. Anne and the Infant St. John the Baptist (Burlington House Cartoon)* is part of the collection at the National Gallery in London. The National Gallery has made the visual usage rights for this work available under a Creative Commons license for non-commercial use only. The image included in this text has been used within the limits of the "fair use" principle for educational, critical, and/or news-related content.



the female body. The artist contrasts the sacred and ideal image of the mother with a non-ideal one. This work offers a critical language for both feminist understanding and body politics. Furthermore, this work provides a deeper understanding of the female body and motherhood within the context of social meanings and individual experiences.

**Figure 7.** Jenny Saville, *Mother and Children (After the Leonardo Cartoon)*, 2011, (O/C), 106 cm x 86 cm<sup>7</sup>



## Conclusion

Jenny Saville explored and interpreted the traditional understanding of the figure in her unique style. By combining traditional, modern, and postmodern artistic approaches, Saville critically questioned the definition of beauty and the perception of the body with a critical perspective on society's aesthetic norms. By exaggerating and distorting bodily forms, she aimed to blur the boundaries between beauty and ugliness. While the nakedness and powerlessness of the body evoke a sense of discomfort in the viewer, she also openly demonstrated the fragility and naturalness of human experience. She questioned society's expectations and norms regarding female identity. She explored the female body through various representations, making visible gender issues through her works. Through the use of colors and textures in her representations

---

<sup>7</sup> Jenny Saville's work *Mother and Children (After the Leonardo Cartoon)* is part of a private collection. The rights to use the work belong to the artist. This image used in the text has been used on a limited basis within the framework of the "fair use" principle for content that has educational, critical, or news value.

of flesh and body, she evoked intense emotion and simultaneously evoked a thought-provoking experience in the viewer.

Saville played a significant role in the reinterpretation of gender and the body in her paintings. Saville's works, by disregarding historical and cultural perceptions of the female body, showed the viewer a way to transcend these perceptions. Judith Butler's insights into body imagery significantly contribute to the understanding of Saville's paintings. Butler argued that the body is shaped by social structure and that this structure influences perceptions of female identity. Similarly, the female bodies in Saville's paintings are not merely works of art, but also create spaces for resistance and questioning of gender norms. By disregarding conventional perceptions of the body, Saville encourages the viewer to think and question.

British painter Jenny Saville's paintings offer resistance to traditional visual codes that represent the female body in idealized, eroticized, or pacified forms. Saville's large-scale self-portraits reveal the body's imperfections by making its deformities visible. Thus, Saville's paintings reproduce Butler's idea of gender staging on the plastic arts plane. The body offers a practice of identity outside of normative aesthetic conventions. Saville's paintings also visualize Beauvoir's approach, which defines femininity as a historical production. The female body ceases to be an aesthetic object of the male gaze and is positioned before the viewer with its own reality. This also aligns with Irigaray's proposed symbolic system of women in response to diminished representations of women. Saville's figures create a powerful visual field that demonstrates the female identity as a subject, presenting it to representation and viewing. Butler argues that sex is innate, while norms shape gender, and this is achieved through the body. Beauvoir's statement, *a woman is not born, she becomes*, suggests that a patriarchal mindset socially constructs women. She also emphasizes women's experience of their own existence and their freedom. Irigaray develops a new discourse based on gender difference. The views of Butler, de Beauvoir, and Irigaray find meaning in Jenny Saville's paintings. The body's multilayered, fragile, and resistant surface is embodied in the paintings. In line with feminist philosophy, Saville's art becomes a powerful visual field in which gender and femininity are both questioned and reconstructed. Here, art not only represents but also constitutes a site of intellectual resistance and a renewed questioning

of the body's existence. Saville's female bodies serve as indicators of the metaphor of social violence.

Bodies labeled *flawed, ugly, and overweight* by power, consumer culture, and society are presented as they are, raw and unaltered, in Saville's paintings. Saville's bodies challenge the filtered and perfect body imagery fostered by today's social media. At the core of Saville's work is the representation of women's bodies, not idealized. Thus, Saville is one of the artists who, through her work, reveals the unseen in art. Through her paintings, the artist aims to challenge societal taste, beauty standards, and the objectification of the body. Her large-scale works explore female bodies, perceived as flawed, challenging this notion in her audience. Despite the perceived inappropriateness, disapproval, and controversy that some critics and galleries have spurred, Saville's paintings have consistently resisted the practice. She has referenced classical painters and conducted detailed research on the body. She has interpreted the traditional understanding of the figure in her unique style and established a presence within contemporary art.

## References

- Antmen, A. (2013). *20. Yüzyıl Batı Sanat Akımları. [20th Century Western Art Movements]* İstanbul: Sel Yayıncılık.
- Aydınalp, E. B. (2020). Varoluşçu Özgürlük Bağlamında Kadın: Simone de Beauvoir ve İkinci Cinsiyet. [Women in the Context of Existentialist Freedom: Simone de Beauvoir and the Second Sex] *Litera: Dil, Edebiyat ve Kültür Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 30(2), 465-488. Doi Number: <https://doi.org/10.26650/LITERA2020-0066>.
- Blythe, F. (2021). Jenny Saville: İnsan Eti Üzerine Yaptığı Çalışmalarla Beden Normlarına Meydan Okuyan İngiliz Ressam. [The British Artist Who Challenges Body Norms Through His Work on Human Flesh] <https://hero-magazine.com/article/195848/jenny-saville>.
- Cebeci, E., & Gökova, H. (2024). Toplumsal ve Cinsiyet Eleştirisi Bağlamında Jenny Saville Resimlerinde Kadın İmgesi. [The Image of Women in Jenny Saville's Paintings in the Context of Social and Gender Criticism] *Sanat ve Tasarım Dergisi*, (34), 45-61. Doi Number: <https://doi.org/10.18603/sanatvetasarim.1488934>.

- Delice, D. (2022). Luce Irigaray'ın Teorisinde Cinsel Fark Kavramı ve Dönüştürücü Eylem Olarak Mimesis. [The Concept of Sexual Difference in Luce Irigaray's Theory and Mimesis as Transformative Action] *FLSF (Felsefe ve Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi)*, (33), 131-156. Doi Number: <https://doi.org/10.53844/flsf.1071595>.
- Kılıç Gündüz, Y. (2023). Çağdaş Türkiye Sanatının Feminist Özneleri ve Toplumsal Cinsiyet Olgusu Üzerine Hermeneutik Bir Yaklaşım. [A Hermeneutic Approach to Feminist Subjects and Gender in Contemporary Turkish Art] *Ulakbilge Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, 80, 42-59. Doi Number: 10.7816/ulakbilge-11-80-04.
- Lincheap. (t.y.). Jenny Saville kimdir? [Who is Jenny Saville?] <https://www.lincheap.com/blog-jenny-saville-kimdir/>.
- Mattei, S. (2024). Jenny Saville: Çağdaş Sanatta Kadın Formunu Yeniden Tanımlamak. [Jenny Saville: Redefining the Female Form in Contemporary Art.] <https://www.artmajeur.com/tr/magazine/8-sanatcilar-portreler/jenny-saville-cagdas-sanatta-kadin-formunu-yeniden-tanimlamak/336307>.
- Menteşoğlu Chatzoudas, Ç. (2021). Sanat ve Deneyim Bağlamında Resimde Annelik Temasına Bakış: Jenny Saville. [A Look at the Theme of Motherhood in Painting in the Context of Art and Experience: Jenny Saville] *Uluslararası İnsan ve Sanat Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 6(1), 55-68.
- Öz, R., & Aksel, H. S. (2024). Judith Butler'a Göre Kadının Özneliği Problemi. [The Problem of Women's Subjectivity According to Judith Butler] *Erzurum Teknik Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi* (18), 128-139. Doi Number: <https://doi.org/10.29157/etusbed.1246661>.
- Renkçi, T. (2014). Çağdaş Bedenin Sanatçısı: Jenny Saville. [The Artist of the Contemporary Body: Jenny Saville] *Akdeniz Sanat Dergisi*, 7(13).
- Tümer, Ö. (Ed. Şahin, E., 2023). Jenny Saville: Bedensel Normlara Meydan Okumak. [Jenny Saville: Challenging Physical Norms] <https://www.soylentidergi.com/jenny-saville-bedensel-normlara-meydan-okumak/>.

## Figure References

- Figure 1.** Jenny Saville, *Propped*, 1992, (O/C), 213,4 cm x 182,9 cm  
<https://sothebys-com.brightspotcdn.com/dims4/default/b156478/2147483647/strip/true/crop/1688x2000+0+0/resize/2880x3410!/format/webp/quality/90/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fsothebys-brightspot.s3.amazonaws.com%2Fdotcom%2Fb1%2F27%2Fa6%2F99414e5017005dfa2aba158ead2c25d36fcd061adfd3574527996a6ccb%2F912118623-9t431-wall.jpg>
- Figure 2.** Jenny Saville, *Closed Contact*, 1995-1996, C-print Mounted in Plexiglass, 182,9 cm x 182,9 cm x 15,2 cm  
<https://www.artsy.net/artwork/jenny-saville-closed-contact>
- Figure 3.** Jenny Saville, *Fulcrum*, 1998-99, (O/C), 261,6 cm x 487,7 cm  
<https://static.frieze.com/files/inline-images/editorial-articles-jenny-saville-2-ps.png>
- Figure 4.** Edouard Manet, *Olympia*, 1863, (O/C), 130,5 cm x 191 cm  
<https://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/artworks/olympia-712>
- Figure 5.** Jenny Saville, *Mirror*, 2011-12, Charcoal on canvas, 33,5 cm x 55 cm  
[https://artlyst.com/art\\_market\\_news/jenny-savilles-charcoal-drawing-mirror-achieves-2-1-million-sothebys/](https://artlyst.com/art_market_news/jenny-savilles-charcoal-drawing-mirror-achieves-2-1-million-sothebys/)
- Figure 6.** Leonardo Da Vinci, *Virgin and Child with St. Anne and the Infant St. John the Baptist (Burlington House Cartoon)*, 1507, Pen and Ink on Paper, 141,5 cm x 104,6 cm  
<https://www.wga.hu/support/viewer/z.html>
- Figure 7.** Jenny Saville, *Mother and Children (After the Leonardo Cartoon)*, 2011, (O/C), 106 cm x 86 cm  
<https://images.stephenongpin.com/magallery/OngpinMedia/Object/Jenny-SAVILLE-MotherandChildrenAftertheLeonardoCartoon-922018T14529.jpg?width=500&height=1000&qlt=80&format=jpg&mode=max>

## Author Biography

Funda Salt graduated from the Graphics Department of Beykent University's Vocational School in 2009. She graduated from the Painting Department of Kahramanmaraş Sütçü İmam University's Faculty of Fine Arts in 2015. In 2018, she completed her master's degree in Painting at Erciyes University's Institute of Fine

Arts. In 2024, she completed her second master's degree in Graphic Design at KTO Karatay University's Institute of Education. She is currently pursuing her doctorate/art proficiency in art at Eskişehir Osmangazi University's Institute of Social Sciences, Art and Design. Salt has had four solo exhibitions and her work has been featured in many national and international group exhibitions.

For correspondence: graf.tas.00@hotmail.com

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **The Social Function of Art: Humanity and Responsibility in the Photographs of Sebastião Salgado**

Emre ŞİMŞİR

#### **Introduction**

Art, in general terms, reflects the identities, beliefs, and values of societies, while also exerting a substantial influence on social change and upheaval. Simultaneously, art has historically served as a means to critique and question social norms (Başbuğ & Başbuğ, 2024, p. 43; Oktay, 2024, p. 203). The social impacts of art have manifested in various forms throughout history. For instance, from cave paintings to contemporary works, art has embodied the interaction between humans and nature as well as the ideological systems of societies. Ancient cave paintings, for example, functioned as tools in ritualistic practices and belief systems, aiding communities in fulfilling their fundamental needs (Batur & Kuyucuk, 2023, p. 79). Consequently, art has played a pivotal role in the formation and dissemination of cultural values.

Today, with the advancement of technology, art has evolved and contributes to cultural and social transformations through innovative approaches (Güney & Uysal, 2019, p. 289; Kaya, 2022, p. 130). Indeed, from this perspective, it is also used as a tool for propaganda and social criticism today. Artists raise awareness about social issues through their works and influence large audiences. This shows that art is a very effective tool for social change and transformation (Başbuğ & Başbuğ, 2024, p. 43). Photography, one of the powerful art disciplines that attracts attention with its visual aspects under this umbrella, stands out in revealing social problems and creating sensitivity. Photography allows the artist to clearly convey the experiences, emotions, and stories of societies. Photography contributes to the formation of social memory by concretizing individuals' experiences of events (Yenici, 2020, p. 560). In this context, documentary photography is a subfield that focuses on social issues and aims to make these issues visible. Documentary photography focuses on issues such as migration, war, and poverty, supporting viewers in developing empathy for these issues. Documentary photographers often dwell on the destructive effects of war and the harsh conditions of migration, creating social awareness of these issues. The works produced in this field

contribute to shaping collective memory, in addition to strengthening social bonds and interaction (Ak, 2024, p. 248). The opportunities offered by photography in terms of the visibility of social issues not only provide a visual narrative but also reach broader audiences and create different discussion platforms for solving these problems. In this context, documentary photography supports the development of policies aimed at solving social problems by making them visible (Aytuğ, 2023, p. 78). Sebastião Ribeiro Salgado Júnior, an artist who highlights social issues in his works, is a figure who developed and continues to practice this documentary photography. Salgado, who focuses on universal themes such as migration, labor, and environmental issues, not only documents the human tragedies caused by these phenomena through his photographs but also opens up the discussion on the social role of art. This section analyzes the effects of Salgado's visual activism on art from a sociological perspective, taking into account the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of his work. At the same time, the study aims to analyze the social role of art and the place of documentary photography within the framework of social responsibility. This study also aims to discuss the function of art as a propaganda tool and the impact of photography in this field. The focus of the study is Sebastião Salgado's works that address environmental crises, social injustice, and human issues. In this context, the questions to be answered are:

What are the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of documentary photography?

What functions does Salgado's visual activism serve in terms of making social events visible?

What effects does Salgado aim to create on individuals and society through his works?

This study encompassed an analysis of Salgado's *Genesis*, *Workers*, and *Exodus* projects as representative samples. A qualitative research methodology, specifically visual analysis, was utilized to emphasize thematic and aesthetic components during the examination of the selected works. Furthermore, a literature review was conducted to analyze theoretical sources that explore the connection between art and social discourse. This section begins with a general overview of the functions of art, its societal impact, and topics such as documentary photography, visual activism, ethical considerations, and the socially responsible values embedded within photography. Subsequently, an aesthetic and thematic evaluation of Salgado's chosen projects was performed, focusing on themes of



migration, labor, and environmental issues. The study concludes by assessing the influence that Salgado aims to establish within society through his artistic endeavors and by discussing his position within the artistic, ethical, and social frameworks.

### **Photography and Social Responsibility**

In the domain of visual arts, photography focused on social issues to evoke emotional and intellectual responses and to promote change is classified as “visual activism.” A core element of this form of activism, visual culture theory, examines the meanings and effects that visual images have within sociocultural contexts. Analyzing the social and political implications underlying visual imagery enables viewers to interpret these images with enhanced consciousness and critical awareness, rather than superficially. Such an approach also highlights the potential of photography as a tool for social change. Within this framework, documentary photography is utilized as a means to initiate social transformation by documenting individuals' social experiences. This genre not only seeks to demonstrate to viewers the urgency of addressing social issues through visual storytelling but also aims to underscore the significance of these issues (Kütük Yılmaz, 2021, p. 174).

Born in the state of Minas Gerais, Brazil, photojournalist and artist Sebastião Salgado has garnered considerable recognition for his capacity to illuminate social issues through his photography. His projects depict the hardships faced by refugees during their migration and displacement, exposing the plight of individuals confronting socio-economic challenges. Salgado emphasizes the socio-political and economic contexts that drive migration in his works, presenting a compelling form of resistance within the framework of visual activism. Notably, in his *Exodus* project, Salgado comprehensively addresses global migration by illustrating the daily experiences of displaced persons through emotionally impactful photographs. These visual documents not only raise awareness about the adversities encountered by migrants but also foster understanding and empathy among viewers who are removed from these experiences (dos Santos & Savaris, 2017, p. 148; Gold, 2011). The artist's photographs embody complex narratives encompassing themes such as migration, identity, and the struggle for survival under arduous conditions; these narratives are conveyed through various artistic techniques. Consequently, the personal stories of individuals fighting to survive are powerfully transformed by situating them within a broader social

framework (dos Santos & Savaris, 2017, p. 148). Moreover, Salgado's approach to visual storytelling plays a crucial role in elucidating the personal and collective experiences underlying migration. Since the primary objective of Salgado's work is to document and analyze the realities of marginalized societies, it also offers a significant sociological critique (Gold, 2011, p. 418). By cultivating a style of documentary photography grounded in dignity and authenticity, Salgado not only records social struggles but also accentuates the humanity and resilience of those involved. His focus on themes of suffering and strength has contributed to a deeper understanding of migration issues. The portrayal of these themes through photographs transcends mere statistics, enabling us to comprehend the personal narratives of migrants.

Salgado's earlier works, such as *Workers*, *Migration*, and *Exodus*, also emphasize his commitment to highlighting the influence of social issues. For instance, in the *Workers* project, he sought to communicate the detrimental effects of working conditions and globalization on individuals' lives. It is apparent that projects such as *Workers*, which address social challenges, are thematically interconnected. These projects vividly demonstrate the impact of environmental modifications and economic policies on displacement. Salgado's photography plays a catalytic role in promoting social change and raising awareness, thereby encouraging viewers to reflect on these issues (Gold, 2011).

Sebastião Salgado masterfully balances artistic aesthetics with social realities when illustrating challenging themes such as suffering and poverty. Salgado's series, especially within the *Exodus* project, powerfully reflects the hardships faced by migrants and refugees, thereby fostering a profound understanding and empathy among viewers (dos Santos & Savaris, 2017, p. 148; Gold, 2011, p. 418). In this project, his depiction of migrants' struggles and traumas, achieved through compelling lighting and composition, is notably impressive. Due to Salgado's accomplishments, audiences can empathize deeply with the suffering and circumstances experienced by these individuals.

The relationship between viewers' reactions to the works and the images reveals different approaches. Since Salgado's themes often depict difficult human conditions, such as suffering and poverty, they can foster empathy in viewers but also create desensitization (Carnagey et al., 2007, p. 489; Engelhardt et al., 2011, p. 1033). Viewers' perception of these images and their ability

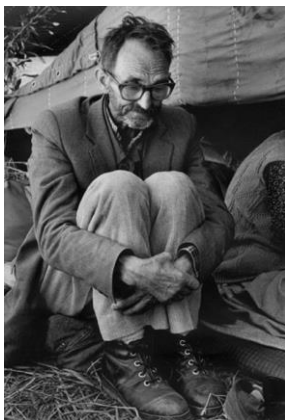
to empathize are shaped by their status as distant observers. While enabling viewers to form an emotional connection with the experiences of others, constant exposure to these images can lead to desensitization to social problems. Research on this topic has revealed that violent images in the media desensitize viewers (Engelhardt et al., 2011, p. 1033; Fanti et al., 2009, p. 186). Salgado's photographic themes also have the potential to create a similar effect. When viewers are constantly confronted with images of poverty and suffering, they may become less sensitive over time due to the impact of this situation, thereby diminishing their ability to comprehend the gravity of such issues fully (Fanti et al., 2009, p. 186). In this regard, Salgado's photographs have exerted influence and incited debate at both individual and societal levels.

Salgado extends his influence beyond the realm of photography by actively participating in social responsibility initiatives. His execution of projects such as 'Instituto Terra' exemplifies his role not only as an attentive professional but also as an advocate for social change. The 'Instituto Terra' project involves reforestation and educational activities in the state of Minas Gerais, Brazil, within the context of social development and environmental sustainability. Additionally, this initiative highlights Salgado's significant contribution to empowering local communities and protecting the environment (Kay, 2011, p. 429; [refloresta.institutoterra.org](http://refloresta.institutoterra.org), 2024).

### **Salgado's Photography and Humanity**

Sebastião Salgado's project *Exodus* provides a comprehensive examination of the phenomenon of migration. In this initiative, Salgado underscores the significant hardships faced by migrants and refugees due to war, poverty, and natural disasters, while also highlighting the human dimension of forced displacement. Salgado's further works on the universality of migration serve as a powerful reminder of human experiences, including suffering and resilience.

**Figure 1.** Refugee, Kladanj, Central Bosnia, 1995, from Sebastião Salgado's *Exodus* series<sup>1</sup>



As demonstrated in figure 1, the human aspect of migration is profoundly depicted in Salgado's *Exodus* series. Within this collection, personal hardship narratives and traumatic circumstances are interconnected from both individual and societal viewpoints. The *Exodus* project underscores the escalating levels of poverty in communities resulting from natural calamities such as floods and droughts, which compel individuals to abandon their homes. Research indicates that natural disasters markedly impact livelihoods and exacerbate poverty among vulnerable populations. Consequently, it is understandable that individuals resort to migration as a means of survival, as illustrated in figure 2 (Hallegatte et al., 2020, p. 223; Khan et al., 2019, p. 14287; Padli et al., 2019, p. 21).

Salgado documents the devastation wrought by natural disasters within his oeuvre, illustrating the emotional and physical harm inflicted upon individuals and communities (Drabo & Mbaye, 2011, p. 3; Shimada, 2022, p. 15). Beyond natural calamities, Salgado also investigates the influence of war and conflict on migration. Violence across various regions leads to forced displacement, compelling individuals to endure arduous conditions. Warfare not only displaces persons but also engenders prolonged struggles for survival, as evidenced by the coping

---

<sup>1</sup> This figure is used under the principle of fair use, in the context of education, criticism, or news reporting, and only in a limited manner.

mechanisms employed by refugees (Mann et al., 2020, p. 1; Walther et al., 2021, p. 4).

**Figure 2.** Strait of Gibraltar, 1997, from Sebastião Salgado's *Exodus* series<sup>2</sup>



**Figure 3.** Goma, Zaire, 1994, from Sebastião Salgado's *Exodus* series<sup>3</sup>



The images depicted in figure 3 from the *Exodus* series exemplify the resilience and hardships faced by individuals ensnared in environments characterized by chaos and despair. This series aims to visualize the personal circumstances underlying the statistical data about migration. *Exodus* underscores the disparities encountered by

---

<sup>2</sup> This figure is used under the principle of fair use, in the context of education, criticism, or news reporting, and only in a limited manner.

<sup>3</sup> This figure is used under the principle of fair use, in the context of education, criticism, or news reporting, and only in a limited manner.

communities confronting systemic issues such as resource scarcity and displacement policies, considering not only warfare but also socio-economic factors associated with migration (Drabo & Mbaye, 2011, p. 3; Shimada, 2022, p. 15). Salgado's photographs frequently emphasize global inequalities, prompting viewers to reflect on the sociopolitical factors contributing to forced migration. The artist's approach to these themes serves as a reminder that migration is not a novel phenomenon; rather, it is an enduring aspect of human history. The focus on an interconnected world affected by environmental degradation, socio-political, and economic inequalities enhances the compelling nature of the artist's work. This project, which depicts migration as a universal and human phenomenon, seeks to raise awareness regarding the displacement of millions due to circumstances beyond their control (Reuveny & Moore, 2009, p. 461; Ullah et al., 2021, p. 336). Salgado's work not only makes an impactful contribution by documenting individuals' adverse experiences but also encourages a more humane response to the ongoing refugee crises worldwide.

**Figure 4.** Greater Burgan Oil Field, Kuwait, 1991, from Sebastião Salgado's *Workers* series<sup>4</sup>



Sebastião Salgado's supplementary project, *Workers*, rigorously investigates the significance of human labor and the challenges associated with employment. As demonstrated in figures 4 and 5, this project portrays workers enduring arduous conditions within the agricultural and industrial sectors, with the intent of

---

<sup>4</sup> This figure is used under the principle of fair use, in the context of education, criticism, or news reporting, and only in a limited manner.

increasing awareness regarding human labor in the contemporary industrial era.

**Figure 5.** Rajasthan Canal Works, Rajasthan, India, 1989, from Sebastião Salgado's *Workers* series<sup>5</sup>



**Figure 6.** Serra Pelada Gold Mine, Pará State, Brazil, 1986 (printed later), from Sebastião Salgado's *Workers* series<sup>6</sup>



The artist intertwines the struggles and lives of laborers with visual aesthetics, thereby conveying the profundity of the labor concept to viewers. In figure 6, miners in gold mines exemplify not

---

<sup>5</sup> This figure has been used solely for educational and critical purposes under the principle of "fair use." All copyrights belong to the artist and their representatives. The artwork is part of the collections of major museums, including the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), Centre Pompidou, Tate, Museo Reina Sofia, and the Art Institute of Chicago.

<sup>6</sup> This figure is used under the principle of fair use, in the context of education, criticism, or news reporting, and only in a limited manner.

only physical hardship but also the resilient human spirit. Mining is frequently associated with hazardous and arduous conditions. Within this context, the physical challenges encountered by workers are powerfully depicted in Salgado's photographs. Furthermore, the work highlights the loss of human values by referencing health issues faced by workers within the mining industry (Gold, 2011, p. 418).

As in his other works, Salgado effectively integrates visual aesthetics with the lived experiences of workers in this project. By adopting an artistic perspective in his photographs, he conveys the challenging living conditions faced by workers through an expressive language. This approach engages viewers and facilitates a profound understanding of the workers' lives (Machado, 2015, p. 37).

**Figure 7.** Cuiabá River, Pantanal, Mato Grosso, Brazil, 2011, from Sebastião Salgado's *Genesis* series<sup>7</sup>



Sebastião Salgado has not only concentrated on social issues but has also addressed environmental concerns in some of his works. Through his *Genesis* project, Salgado aims to highlight environmental issues and promote awareness regarding the conservation of nature.

In this project, the artist aims to help people rediscover humanity's connection with nature by showcasing ecosystems and

---

<sup>7</sup> This figure has been used solely for educational and critical purposes under the principle of “fair use.” All copyrights belong to the artist and their representatives. The artwork is part of the collections of major museums, including the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), Centre Pompidou, Tate, Museo Reina Sofía, and the Art Institute of Chicago.



natural beauty, as seen in figure 7. The artist uses photographs taken in places like the glaciers of Antarctica and the Amazon rainforest to criticize humanity's destruction of nature and to send a powerful message about the need to protect the environment (Ball, 2016, p. 641; Struck, 2014, p. 217).

**Figure 8.** Royal Penguins (*Aptenodytes patagonicus*), South Georgia, 2009, from Sebastião Salgado's *Genesis* series<sup>8</sup>



The project further promotes contemplation concerning the sustainability of the relationship between humans and the environment, while emphasizing the adverse impacts of human endeavors on these natural habitats. In this context, Salgado's work additionally functions as a pressing appeal for the safeguarding of nature (Carr, 2011, p. 417).

Salgado's photographs explore themes pertinent to humanity and nature in a thematically and aesthetically significant manner. As exemplified in photograph 9, Salgado's works transcend socio-economic, geographical, and cultural boundaries by portraying individuals' experiences. Consequently, they enhance the emotional engagement of viewers and reinforce social awareness (Carr, 2011, p. 417; Rudel, 2011, p. 431).

---

<sup>8</sup> This figure is used under the principle of fair use, in the context of education, criticism, or news reporting, and only in a limited manner.

**Figure 9.** Bushmen, Botswana, Africa, 2008, from Sebastião Salgado's *Genesis* series<sup>9</sup>



**Figure 10.** Korem Camp, Ethiopia, 1985, from Sebastião Salgado's *Exodus* series<sup>10</sup>



---

<sup>9</sup> This figure has been used solely for educational and critical purposes under the principle of “fair use.” All copyrights belong to the artist and their representatives. The artwork is part of the collections of major museums, including the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), Centre Pompidou, Tate, Museo Reina Sofía, and the Art Institute of Chicago.

<sup>10</sup> This figure has been used solely for educational and critical purposes under the principle of “fair use.” All copyrights belong to the artist and their representatives. The artwork is part of the collections of major museums, including the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), Centre Pompidou, Tate, Museo Reina Sofía, and the Art Institute of Chicago.

The artist once again offers a perspective that profoundly interrogates humanity's unfortunate condition by further emphasizing individuals' identities and experiences through the portraits within the *Exodus* series. Moreover, in numerous portraits, such as figure 10, the artist reflects human struggles for survival and their living conditions not solely through facial expressions but also through gazes. Through capturing these types of gazes, the artist provides audiences with a multicultural visual experience and fosters awareness regarding human rights and social justice issues (Kay, 2011, p. 424).

**Figure 11.** Serra Pelada Gold Mine, Brazil, 1986, from Sebastião Salgado's *Workers* series<sup>11</sup>



Salgado's photographs, characterized by their open compositions that frequently depict large groups, emphasize collective identities and social interactions. These images depict exchanges among individuals, illustrating their position within society and underscoring the notion that people constitute part of a greater whole. This approach not only reveals individual experiences but also elucidates the comprehensive social structures forged through shared experiences (Carr, 2011, p. 417; Kay, 2011, p. 428). Salgado's artistically composed photographs, with their depth achieved through expert lighting and a monochromatic palette, foster

---

<sup>11</sup> This figure has been used solely for educational and critical purposes under the principle of "fair use." All copyrights belong to the artist and their representatives. The artwork is part of the collections of major museums, including the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), Centre Pompidou, Tate, Museo Reina Sofia, and the Art Institute of Chicago.

an emotional resonance with viewers. Consequently, Salgado's imagery enriches social and cultural narratives, rendering these stories more vivid and impactful for the audience (Leder et al., 2013, p. 1). Furthermore, Salgado adeptly guides the viewer's attention to specific focal points within his compositions, thereby communicating his message with greater effectiveness (Carr, 2011, p. 417; Rudel, 2011, p. 431).

## **Conclusion**

Art, influenced by technology, serves as a medium of expression that facilitates change by highlighting social issues. The art of photography also enhances societal awareness, shaping and documenting collective memory. Sebastião Ribeiro Salgado Júnior, a prominent figure in this domain, engages in visual activism by integrating socio-political and economic concerns, such as migration and inequality, with the aesthetic language of art. Salgado emphasizes the capacity of photography to effect social change and transformation through visual activism. In essence, visual activism aims to raise awareness, mobilize communities, induce transformation, and foster collective consciousness through the use of art and imagery. Consequently, this approach not only brings attention to issues overlooked or normalized by society but also presents iconic or compelling images to the audience, thereby emphasizing the gravity of these issues. Photographs serve to foreground challenging topics, enabling the disruption of taboos surrounding them. Within this context, Salgado concentrates on illuminating social tragedies and inequalities in the collective consciousness via his photographs. He endeavors to inspire the public to question these disparities, thereby cultivating empathy and awareness. Through this endeavor, Salgado demonstrates that photographs are not merely an expressive tool but also a catalyst supporting social transformation and change. For instance, in his *Exodus* project, Salgado compellingly depicted human suffering and experiences related to migration, highlighting the devastating material and spiritual impacts of poverty caused by natural disasters and war on individuals and communities with artistic emphasis.

According to the findings of this study, Salgado's photographs evoke sensitivity to social issues by addressing elements such as visual language, composition, and compelling storytelling through aesthetic expression. The artist seeks to engage the viewer emotionally by employing fundamental principles of art, including

composition, light, color, and contrast, to communicate his intended message effectively. His proficiency in utilizing these tools to focus attention on others' experiences and establish an emotional connection with the audience is notably commendable. From another perspective, the aesthetic components in his works enhance the impact of his photographs, allowing them to reach a broader audience. Nonetheless, this dramatization appears to also open avenues for the romanticization of reality or the use of tragedy as an aesthetic device. When examining Salgado's photographic oeuvre as a whole, one observes a cohesive aesthetic flow and narratives that impart depth. This evidences the artist's employment of various artistic techniques to foster viewer empathy with others.

Furthermore, the ethical dimension of photography becomes prominent in the artist's works. According to his perspective, the ethical aspect of documentary photography encompasses social responsibility and the imperative to respect human dignity. Consequently, photography has offered an opportunity to communicate events without manipulation or distortion, but rather through documentation. Sebastião Salgado not only creates visual aesthetics in his works but also produces meaningful pieces on a social level, establishing a compelling example of aesthetic and ethical harmony. Nonetheless, it is an undeniable truth that maintaining the perception of reality is critically vital for the credibility of documentary photography. Therefore, it is imperative to exercise caution to avoid exposing viewers to consistently shocking images that may lead to desensitization. While raising awareness of social issues, viewers should not become passive observers. The equilibrium between aesthetic and ethical principles in documentary photography limits the social and artistic influence of the discipline. Ethical principles ensure that photography bears social responsibility, whereas aesthetic principles facilitate the dissemination of this responsibility to broader audiences.

### Referances

- Ak, M. (2024). An Evaluation of the Reflections of Social Events on Painting Art From the 20th Century to the Present in the Context of War and Migration. *The Journal of Academic Social Sciences*, 155(155), 248–269. <https://doi.org/10.29228/asos.76985>
- Aytuğ, E. (2023). Michel De Certeau'nun "Taktikler ve Stratejiler" Kavramsallaştırması Bağlamında Sabiha Çimen'in "Hafız:

- Kuran'ın Muhafızları" Adlı Belgesel Fotoğraf Çalışmasının Değerlendirilmesi [An Evaluation of Sabiha Çimen's Documentary Photography Project "Hafiz: Guardians of the Quran" in the Context of Michel De Certeau's Conceptualization of "Tactics and Strategies"]. *Çukurova Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi*, 32(3), 78-95. <https://doi.org/10.35379/cusosbil.1225617>
- Ball, C. (2016). Moreover, There Was Light: Sebastião Salgado's Genesis and (Ethno) Primitivist Realism. *American Anthropologist*, 118(3), 641-645. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aman.12679>
- Başbuğ, Z., & Başbuğ, F. (2024). Propagandanın Resim Sanatındaki Görsel Dili Üzerine Bir Değerlendirme [An Assessment of the Visual Language of Propaganda in Pictorial Art]. *Yüzüncü Yıl Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi*, 63, 42-57. <https://doi.org/10.53568/yyusbed.1394877>
- Batur, M., & Kuyucuk, E. (2023). Mağara Resimlerinden Günümüze Ulaşan Dışavurumcu Sanat [Expressionist Art from Cave Paintings to the Present Day]. *İnönü Üniversitesi Kültür ve Sanat Dergisi*, 8(2), 79-87. <https://doi.org/10.22252/ijca.1203085>
- Carnagey, N. L., Anderson, C. A., & Bushman, B. J. (2007). The Effect of Video Game Violence on Physiological Desensitization to Real-Life Violence. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 43(3), 489-496. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2006.05.003>
- Carr, D. (2011). The Forum: Celebrating the Work of Sebastião Salgado: A Sociological Lens on Salgado's Documentary Photography. *Sociological Forum*, 26(2), 416-417. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1573-7861.2011.01247.x>
- Dos Santos, S. S. S., & Savaris, T. (2017). Os Signos Da Fotografia: Um Olhar Sobre O Projeto Êxodos De Sebastião Salgado. *Cadernos De Comunicação*, 21(1), 147-171. <https://doi.org/10.5902/2316882x21285>
- Drabo, A., & Mbaye, L. M. (2011). Climate Change, Natural Disasters and Migration: An Empirical Analysis in Developing Countries. *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 1-30. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1921978>

- Engelhardt, C. R., Bartholow, B. D., Kerr, G. T., & Bushman, B. J. (2011). This is Your Brain on Violent Video Games: Neural Desensitization to Violence Predicts Increased Aggression Following Violent Video Game Exposure. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 47(5), 1033–1036. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2011.03.027>
- Fanti, K. A., Vanman, E. J., Henrich, C. C., & Avraamides, M. N. (2009). Desensitization to Media Violence Over a Short Period of Time. *Aggressive Behavior*, 35(2), 179-187. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ab.20295>
- Gold, S. J. (2011). Sebastião Salgado and Visual Sociology. *Sociological Forum*, 26(2), 418-423. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1573-7861.2011.01248.x>
- Güney, E., & Uysal, S. (2019). Kültürel Dönüşümler ve Teknolojik Gelişmeler İlişkisinde Jeneratif Sanat [Generative Art in the Relationship Between Cultural Transformations and Technological Developments]. *Art-E Sanat Dergisi*, 12(24), 289-314. <https://doi.org/10.21602/sduarte.628568>
- Hallegatte, S., Vogt-Schilb, A., Rozenberg, J., Bangalore, M., & Beaudet, C. (2020). From Poverty to Disaster and Back: A Review of the Literature. *Economics of Disasters and Climate Change*, 4(1), 223–247. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41885-020-00060-5>
- Kay, T. (2011). Building Solidarity With Subjects and Audience in Sociology and Documentary Photography. *Sociological Forum*, 26(2), 424–430. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1573-7861.2011.01249.x>
- Kaya, M. E. (2022). Changing Paradigms in Technological Art Applications and an Investigation on the Commercialization of Art: NFT Application. *The Journal of Social Sciences*, 58(58), 130-143. <https://doi.org/10.29228/sobider.63026>
- Khan, K. A., Zaman, K., Shoukry, A. M., Sharkawy, A., Gani, S., Sasmoko, A., J., K., A., & Hishan, S. S. (2019). Natural Disasters and Economic Losses: Controlling External Migration, Energy and Environmental Resources, Water Demand, and Financial Development for Global Prosperity. *Environmental Science and Pollution Research*, 26(14), 14287–14299. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11356-019-04755-5>

- Kütük Yılmaz, P. (2021). Gençlerle Yürütülen Photovoice Projeleri: Katılımlı Bir Araştırma Yöntemi [Photovoice Projects with Young People: A Participatory Research Method]. *OPUS Uluslararası Toplum Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 17(33), 174-192. <https://doi.org/10.26466/opus.755521>
- Leder, H., Ring, A., & Dreßler, S. (2013). See Me, Feel Me! Aesthetic Evaluations of Art Portraits. *Psychology of Aesthetics Creativity and the Arts*, 7(4), 358-369. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0033311>
- Machado, K. C. (2015). La Politique Des Émotions Suscitées Par La Formalisation Esthétique De La Photographie De Sebastião Salgado. *Voix Plurielles*, 12(1), 37-51. <https://doi.org/10.26522/vp.v12i1.1173>
- Mann, E., Alexander, K., Yen, C., Olson, A., Hoffman, S. J., Mamo, B., Frerich, E. A., Weinberg, M., Mayali, H., McCoy, M., Prasad, S., Dunlop, S. J., & Stauffer, W. M. (2020). Health Challenges in Refugee Resettlement: An Innovative Multi-Sector Partnership to Improve the Continuum of Care for Resettled Refugees. *Journal of Travel Medicine*, 27(7), 1-3. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jtm/taaa103>
- Oktay, G. (2024). Bir Çalışmanın Sanat Eseri Olarak Değerlendirilme Sürecine Eleştirel Bakış [A Critical Look at the Process of Evaluating a Work as a Work of Art]. *Tykhe Sanat ve Tasarım Dergisi*, 9(16), 203-221. <https://doi.org/10.55004/tykhe.1447626>
- Padli, J., Ahmat, N., & Nawawi, M. (2019). The Impact of Natural Disasters, Technological Change, and Education on Poverty Rate: Evidence From Developing Countries. *Jurnal Ekonomi Malaysia*, 53(2), 21-28. <https://doi.org/10.17576/jem-2019-5302-2>
- Refloresta.institutoterra.org*. Geliş tarihi 11 Ocak 2025, gönderen <https://refloresta.institutoterra.org/home>
- Reuveny, R., & Moore, W. H. (2009). Does Environmental Degradation Influence Migration? Emigration to Developed Countries in the Late 1980s and 1990s. *Social Science Quarterly*, 90(3), 461-479. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6237.2009.00569.x>
- Rudel, T. K. (2011). Images, Ideology, and Praxis in the Environmental Movement: Sebastião Salgado's Genesis



- Project. *Sociological Forum*, 26(2), 431–437.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1573-7861.2011.01250.x>
- Shimada, G. (2022). The Impact of Climate-Change-Related Disasters on Africa's Economic Growth, Agriculture, and Conflicts: Can Humanitarian Aid and Food Assistance Offset the Damage? *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(1), 467.  
<https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19010467>
- Singer, A. (2010). Sebastião Salgado, Behind the Lens. *Contexts*, 9(3), 40–45. <https://doi.org/10.1525/ctx.2010.9.3.40>
- Struck, W. (2014). Genesis, Retold: In Search of an Atlas of the Anthropocene. *Environmental Humanities*, 5(1), 217–232.  
<https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-3615487>
- Ullah, A. A., Hossain, M. A., & Huque, A. S. (2021). Non-Conventional Migration: An Evolving Pattern in South Asia. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 57(2), 335–351.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096211008468>
- Walther, L., Amann, J., Flick, U., Ta, T. M. T., Bajbouj, M., & Hahn, E. (2021). A Qualitative Study on Resilience in Adult Refugees in Germany. *BMC Public Health*, 21(1), 1–17.  
<https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-021-10817-6>
- Yenici, M. (2020). Toplumsal Bellek Kaydı Olarak Ara Güler'in Meyhane Fotoğrafları [Ara Güler's Tavern Photographs as a Record of Social Memory]. *Artsanat*, 14, 557–577.  
<https://doi.org/10.26650/artsanat.2020.14.0021>

### Figure References

- Figure 1.** Refugee, Kladanj, Central Bosnia, 1995, from Sebastião Salgado's *Exodus* series <https://publicdelivery.org/Sebastião-salgado-exodus/>.
- Figure 2.** Strait of Gibraltar, 1997, from Sebastião Salgado's *Exodus* series <https://publicdelivery.org/Sebastião-salgado-exodus/>.
- Figure 3.** Goma, Zaire, 1994, from Sebastião Salgado's *Exodus* series <https://publicdelivery.org/Sebastião-salgado-exodus/>.
- Figure 4.** Greater Burgan Oil Field, Kuwait, 1991, from Sebastião Salgado's *Workers* series <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/Sebastião-salgado-greater-burhan-oil-field-kuwait-1995>

**Figure 5.** Rajasthan, India, 1989, from Sebastião Salgado's *Workers* series <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/Sebastião-salgado-worker-on-the-canal-construction-site-rajasthan-india>

**Figure 6.** Serra Pelada Gold Mine, Pará State, Brazil, 1986 (printed later), from Sebastião Salgado's *Workers* series <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/Sebastião-salgado-military-police-patrolling-the-gold-mine-of-serra-pelada-state-of-para-brazil>

**Figure 7.** Cuiabá River, Pantanal, Mato Grosso, Brazil, 2011, from Sebastião Salgado's *Genesis* series

**Figure 8.** Royal Penguins (*Aptenodytes patagonicus*), South Georgia, 2009, from Sebastião Salgado's *Genesis* series, <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/Sebastião-salgado-groupe-de-manchots-royaux-apternodytes-patagonicus-georgie-du-sud-2009-serie-genesis->

**Figure 9.** Bushmen, Botswana, Africa, 2008, from Sebastião Salgado's *Genesis* series, <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/Sebastião-salgado-bushmen-botswana-holding-bird-africa>

**Figure 10.** Korem Camp, Ethiopia, 1985, from Sebastião Salgado's *Exodus* series, <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/Sebastião-salgado-korem-camp-ethiopia-1985>

**Figure 11.** Serra Pelada Gold Mine, Brazil, 1986, from Sebastião Salgado's *Workers* series, <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/Sebastião-salgado-serra-pelada-gold-mine-brazil>

### Author Biography

Emre Şimşir graduated from Selçuk University, Faculty of Art and Design, Department of Traditional Crafts Design and Production. He completed his master's degree in the field of Traditional Crafts at the same institution and later began pursuing his Proficiency in Art (PhD) studies at Eskişehir Osmangazi University. His research focuses on the transformation of traditional Turkish motifs within contemporary art practices, digital art applications, and visual culture studies.

Alongside his academic work, Şimşir produces graphic design projects, develops environmentally conscious digital design templates, and works as a content creator on Canva. He continues to

advance both theoretical and practice-based projects through an interdisciplinary approach.

For correspondence: [emre\\_simsir@outlook.com](mailto:emre_simsir@outlook.com)

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **The Contradictions in Ai Weiwei's Art Through Yin-Yang Philosophy**

Melih Can TOYGU

#### **Introduction**

Also known by his pseudonym aiww, Ai Weiwei is one of the most influential figures in contemporary art. He has drawn significant attention not only for his aesthetic and artistic creativity but also for his political criticism and identity as an activist. His critical relationship with the Chinese government is a fundamental element that has shaped both his art and worldview. The childhood years Weiwei spent witnessing China's political and social transformations under Mao Zedong left a profound mark on his art (Mendes & Weiwei, 2022). His works are more than just a critique of the modern world; they also contain an internal balance that reflects China's rich cultural and philosophical heritage. In this regard, the philosophical principles of Yin-Yang can provide a compelling analytical framework for understanding the contrasts and transformations present in his work.

Yin-Yang is a cornerstone of Chinese thought, positing that all entities and processes in the universe possess opposing yet complementary characteristics (Fang, 2012). This philosophical approach can serve as a vital tool for making sense of the relationship between nature and humanity, the individual's connection to society, and art's ties to politics. The contrasts visible in Ai Weiwei's works such as traditional and modern, individual and collective, local and global clearly demonstrate this dynamic balance of Yin-Yang.

This study will analyze Ai Weiwei's art through the framework of Yin-Yang philosophy, providing an opportunity to understand the profound structure of his works and examine the impact of China's cultural heritage on contemporary art. As Janet Wolff notes, deeply examining art's social and cultural contexts can help us better grasp its meaning and function (Wolff, 2021). The Yin-Yang philosophy offers a robust theoretical framework for comprehending the contrasts in Ai Weiwei's works and the balance they form when brought together. Existing literature, as exemplified by works from Fang (2012) and Cummins (2021), demonstrates that this approach can uniquely contribute to interpreting Ai Weiwei's art.

While the artist reflects society (Çalikoğlu, 2022), the process of art becoming autonomous and independent is of significant importance (Acemoğlu, 2021). Today, new cultural forms express the transformation of art (Demirkubuz, 2021). Therefore, this study aims to approach Ai Weiwei's works from an aesthetic perspective and with this philosophical depth.

## **Methodology**

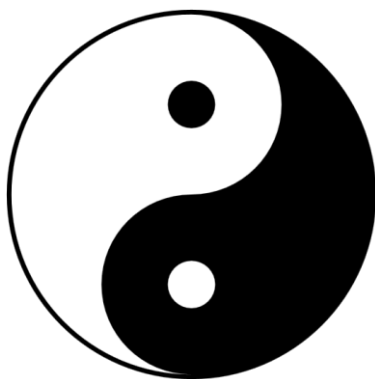
This study adopts the Yin-Yang philosophy as its analytical framework to understand Ai Weiwei's art, activism, and economic activities. It utilizes a systematic literature review a widely accepted method in the social sciences. Rather than a comprehensive synthesis of the field, the method is employed here as a structured approach to critical interpretation, which posits that visual analysis is always conducted through a specific analytical gaze or theoretical lens (Rose, 2022). The systematic review method aims to examine the existing body of knowledge on a specific topic and develop a new perspective by critically analyzing this information (Hart, 1998). This research provides an interdisciplinary perspective by combining fundamental sources on Yin-Yang philosophy (Fang, 2012; Cummins, 2021) and academic literature on Ai Weiwei's art and activism (Mendes & Weiwei, 2022; Lentz & Buffington, 2020). The systematic review was used as a tool not only to investigate the historical and philosophical origins of the Yin-Yang concept but also to understand how this concept is embodied in Ai Weiwei's works. This approach is recognized as an effective tool for comprehending the relationship between theory and practice in the social sciences (Boote & Belie, 2005). The study critically evaluated the connections between the fundamental principles of Yin-Yang philosophy and Ai Weiwei's works, and the existing literature was utilized to develop a novel interpretation within this context. Specifically, the analysis systematically maps the core dualities of Yin-Yang philosophy onto the symbolic, material, and political contradictions present in Ai Weiwei's selected artworks and public actions.

## **A Yin-Yang Perspective on the Unity of Opposites**

The term Yin-Yang is a dialectical concept that symbolizes duality and balance. It has evolved over time into its most well-known and influential form. Initially expressed through more complex depictions, the concept has since transformed into a simple

symbol, like the dance of black and white. (Figure 1) Yin-Yang is an ancient Chinese philosophy and one of the most recognizable symbols in East Asia (Fang, 2012). The symbol consists of a circle divided into two equal halves by a curved line; one side is black (Yin), and the other is white (Yang). The white dot in the black area and the black dot in the white area represent that opposites coexist and form a whole (Fang, 2012). From this fundamental principle, it is concluded that everything exists alongside its opposite, and these opposites complement each other.

**Figure 1.** Taijitu (Yin-Yang) symbol. A public domain symbol representing the unity and integrity of opposites in Chinese philosophy<sup>1</sup>



There are various views on its origins. As explained by G.-M. Chen (2008, as cited in Fang, 2012), the historical and philosophical characteristics of Yin-Yang were detailed in an analysis of the understanding of change (Bina) found in the famous Chinese classic, I Ching (also known as the Book of Changes), which dates back more than 3,000 years (Fang, 2012). It is believed that there are two different versions of the I Ching. Although the older version (or pre-King Wen version) is thought to have existed approximately 5,000-7,000 years ago, it has not survived to the present day for various reasons. Today, the Chinese use the newer version of the I Ching, which is said to have been written by King Wen approximately 3,500-4,000 years ago. This newer version, which also includes the idea of Yin-Yang, has influenced almost every aspect of Chinese life, including philosophy, religion, medicine, art, and military strategy

---

<sup>1</sup> All visual files in this article have been used on a limited basis in content for educational, critical, or news reporting purposes, based on the "fair use" principle.

(Cummins, 2021). Thus, the concept of Yin-Yang has become a fundamental part of Chinese culture.

Yin and Yang represent two opposing cosmic energies believed to shape all events in the universe in Chinese philosophy (Fang, 2012). Yin and Yang cannot be considered separately. They are part of the Tao (the operating principle of the universe) (Leconte, 1988). Everything is composed of a subtle mixture of Yin and Yang, which creates infinite diversity. The purpose of Yin-Yang is to understand the order of the world and find a position that benefits us the most in both nature and society, while avoiding places and situations that could harm us (Cummins, 2021). Therefore, Yin-Yang is not merely a symbol but also a tool for understanding the universe and life itself.

The theory of Yin-Yang has evolved over centuries. It has a history that extends from simple drawings of the sun and mountain slopes to the beginning of Chinese writing thousands of years ago. The development of a theory based on natural opposing pairs is known as proto Yin Yang. Later, different schools of thought, such as Taoism and Confucianism, applied complex Yin-Yang systems to state governance, warfare, medicine, weather forecasting, celestial studies, ritual magic, and other fields (Leconte, 1988).

Yin and Yang have some opposing associations. A thing is either Yin or Yang, but this can change depending on the context (Cummins, 2021). This means that the classification of something as Yin or Yang is not absolute; it can vary according to the situation.

The following table provides a general overview of Yin-Yang associations. (Table 1)

**Table 1.** Some Examples of Yin-Yang Attributes (Liu, vd, 2023)

<b>YIN</b>	Negative	Cold	Soft	Weak	Low	Small	Short	Black
<b>YANG</b>	Positive	Hot	Hard	Strong	High	Large	Long	White

The Yin or Yang quality of everything in the universe can change compared to something else. If something is too Yin, either Yin needs to be removed, or Yang needs to be added. If there is too much Yang, either Yang needs to be removed, or Yin needs to be added (Cummins, 2021).

The Yin-Yang concept has deeply permeated Chinese thought and philosophy, providing a fundamental framework for understanding the universe, nature, and human life. Based on the principle of the unity and balance of opposites, this philosophy has

continued to influence Chinese culture and its way of thinking for thousands of years.

When examining Ai Weiwei's artistic expressions, the profound influence of Yin-Yang philosophy can be observed. This philosophy emphasizes the interaction of opposites and the pursuit of balance. Weiwei's works frequently question traditional narratives, reflecting the dynamic tension between societal norms and individual freedom. This situation is reminiscent of the duality in the Yin-Yang symbol. Therefore, his art not only criticizes the status quo but also embodies the essence of unity within diversity. This approach also aligns with the fundamental principles of Yin-Yang, which permeates Chinese thought and culture.

### **#aiww The Activist Artist**

Ai Weiwei is a Chinese artist and activist. His multifaceted personality is more complex than a rebellious dissident. In China, a person who does not self-censor their expression, does not recognize totalitarian power, and does not see this power as legitimate can be defined as a dissident (Cheng, 2011). According to Ai Weiwei, artists and activists should fight for freedom and defend the fundamental dignity of life. He says that he has no goal or mission and tries to appreciate all the opportunities presented to him (Weiwei, 2021). Even in the early stages of his recognition, the world-renowned artist Ai Weiwei exhibits a dual identity as a global art icon (Yang) and a dissident targeted by the Chinese government (Yin).

Ai Weiwei describes himself as a thinker motivated by curiosity and even *selfishness*. He aims to break established thought patterns by intervening directly in unusual situations, avoiding confinement to rationality, and escaping simplified conclusions. Despite his own selfishness, his artistic actions transcend this boundary by inviting the audience to thought experiments about the world. He treats the world as a *readymade*<sup>2</sup> object that needs to be experienced and transformed into a work of art. He values appearing as a public intellectual because it gives him a sense of security and helps him in his attempt to find his identity. According to him, it is not possible to be an individual without an identity, and identity is possible with the existence of reason. Therefore, being in the public

---

<sup>2</sup> A 'readymade' is a concept from Marcel Duchamp where a found object is presented as art, prioritizing the artist's conceptual choice over technical skill.



eye, not hiding, is necessary for discovering his identity (Mendes & Weiwei, 2022).

### **The Integrity of Contrasts**

When viewed through the lens of Yin-Yang, Ai Weiwei's artworks, political activism, and economic activities reflect the complex interaction of opposing forces. His works are evaluated as highlighting the struggle between authoritarian control (Yang) and individual expression (Yin) while addressing tensions in Chinese society and global politics.

As an artist familiar with traditional Chinese art and Western modernism, Weiwei combines contrasts such as East and West, traditional and modern, and individual and collective in his works. This approach reflects the idea that opposites complement each other to form a whole, a fundamental principle of Yin-Yang philosophy.

Ai Weiwei effectively utilizes social media (Yang) to disseminate his art and political views. Through blog posts, Twitter shares, and Instagram photos, he reaches a wide audience and bypasses censorship. However, this public exposure also makes him vulnerable to criticism and attacks (Yin). His art and activism have received both praise and criticism in China and internationally. While some see him as a defender of freedom and human rights (Yang), others find him provocative and unnecessarily controversial (Yin). These opposing views reflect the subjective nature of art and the complex reactions Weiwei's work generates. Weiwei defines himself as a thinker (Yin) and sees his art as a product of his effort to understand and question the world. Yet, he is also an action-oriented (Yang) artist who uses his art as a tool to instigate social change (Weiwei, 2021). His art has a dynamic structure that reflects the principles of constant change and balance in Yin-Yang philosophy. His works show the coexistence of opposites and how they influence each other, inviting the viewer to see the world from a different perspective. Ai Weiwei's works are thought to have a powerful impact in a social and political context. In particular, his works have drawn attention for carrying deep messages on social justice, human rights, and freedom of expression.

In this context, the first example is *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*: A photographic triptych documenting Weiwei's act of dropping a fragile, historic 2,000-year-old vase onto the hard ground. The irreversible shattering of the ceramic material concretizes the sharp transition from static history (Yin) to kinetic destruction (Yang). It

can be said that through this provocative act of iconoclasm, he reflects the censorship and limits imposed by the government on access to information and the erasure of cultural memory in Communist China. In response to the anger surrounding the work, Weiwei recalled Mao Zedong's teaching that we can only build a new world if we destroy the old one (Lentz & Buffington, 2020).

Ai Weiwei's vases are defined as ceramic readymades that he purchased, and this work follows the tradition of Marcel Duchamp's 1917 work titled *Fountain*. Ai has a complex relationship with the thousands of years of Chinese craftsmanship represented by Han and Neolithic vases. On the one hand, he emphasizes these skills by drawing attention to the danger of craft traditions disappearing. On the other hand, his works with these readymades exhibit an iconoclastic approach that contains a rage toward the history of craftsmanship (Jones, 2015).

Ai Weiwei has not definitively explained his relationship with Han and Neolithic vases. Still, he has stated that he has collected, organized, photographed, and documented these objects as multiplied, copied, and painted. Employing a strategy of repetition similar to Andy Warhol's Marilyn silkscreens, Weiwei's stacking of Han dynasty vases serves as a critique of their origins in the imperial industry's system of mass production. These vessels were produced on a hierarchical scale, with the best quality for the emperor, a lower quality for court members, and the lowest quality for export. By collecting, transforming, and breaking these vases, Weiwei offers a critical perspective on the old imperial mass production system with a Duchampian cynicism (Jones, 2015).

Ai Weiwei's work *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* (1995) can be interpreted as a challenge to traditional values (Yin) and an act of defiance (Yang). In this act, Weiwei is seen as questioning the authority of the past while also symbolizing a search for a new identity and cultural transformation. The Yin-Yang philosophy is not just about opposition; it contains fundamental principles such as the interdependence of opposites, the pursuit of dynamic balance, and their transformation into each other. How does it reflect the principle of transformation? In the work *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*, the act of destruction (a Yin aspect) is transformed into creating a new meaning and a critical expression (a Yang aspect). (Figure 2)

**Figure 2.** Ai Weiwei, *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*, 1995. Three gelatin silver prints. (Source: Smarthistory).<sup>3</sup>



Ai Weiwei's work *Fairytale* is a large-scale performance art piece created for Documenta 12, an exhibition held in Kassel, Germany, in 2007. In this project, 1001 ordinary Chinese citizens were brought to Kassel in five rotating groups, and these individuals functioned as living parts of the artwork. Through this work, Ai Weiwei delved deeply into the themes of individuality and collectivity. The title of the work, a reference to the tales of the Brothers Grimm, emphasizes that each of the participants carried different stories and identities. Ai Weiwei stated that by observing the rise of Chinese social media, he realized that each participant represented an identity and that these individuals could make their voices heard separately. The participants were recruited through Ai's website and advertisements in China. While focusing on the relationship between individuality and collectivity, the work also reveals the East-West divide, questioning the combination and interaction of different cultural perspectives. The challenges Ai Weiwei faced during the project included the participants being forced to travel to Germany in five groups due to passports issued by the Chinese Government (Cheng, 2011).

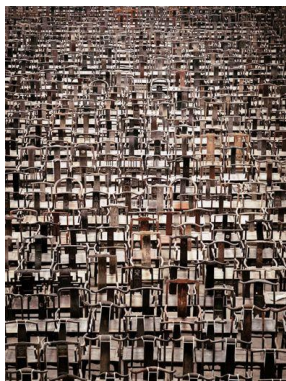
Furthermore, a 2.5-hour digital video documentary was shot about *Fairytale*, and in an interview in March 2009, Ai Weiwei directed the interviewer to the sina.com blog archive to answer questions about the project. During this conversation, Ai Weiwei conveyed his thoughts on the project while reading a newspaper. *Fairytale* stands out as an essential work of art in a social context, questioning the dynamics between individuality and collectivity and emphasizing the identities of the participants (Cheng, 2011).

---

<sup>3</sup> All visual files in this article have been used on a limited basis in content for educational, critical, or news reporting purposes, based on the "fair use" principle.

This work synthesizes cultural interaction (Yang) and individual experiences (Yin). With this project, Weiwei draws attention to the issues of immigration and identity. (Figure 3)

**Figure 3.** Ai Weiwei, *Fairytale (detail)*, 2007. The installation of 1001 stools from the Ming and Qing Dynasties (1368-1911) were exhibited in Documenta 12, Kassel.<sup>4</sup>



*Remembering* was an installation on the façade of the Haus der Kunst art museum in Munich, Germany, in 2009. It was created to commemorate the 5,385 children who died in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake. The work consisted of more than 9,000 brightly colored children's backpacks used to spell out the Chinese characters for “She lived happily in this world for seven years” (Lentz & Buffington, 2020). The use of children's backpacks embodies the principle of opposition-unity from different perspectives of Yin-Yang. While the colorful backpacks (Yang) represent the potential of life, it can be said that these objects also serve as a memorial stone (Yin), reflecting the lost innocence.

The information collected by the Sichuan Names Project became an inspiration for Ai's subsequent series of projects, and student backpacks were used to create installations in various exhibitions abroad (Cheng, 2011). Ai Weiwei's work *Remembering* adopts Andy Warhol's understanding of repetition and mass production. The repetition we often see in Warhol's works is used here to emphasize the number of children who lost their lives and the gravity of this loss. At the same time, its encounter with Allen

---

<sup>4</sup> All visual files in this article have been used on a limited basis in content for educational, critical, or news reporting purposes, based on the "fair use" principle.

Ginsberg's poem *White Shroud* allows for the expression of loss and mourning through a literary language. While Ginsberg's poem delves into the themes of death and mourning, Ai's work tackles these themes with a visual language (Jones, 2015). It can be said that Warholian repetitions (Yang) recall the statistical dimension of mass destruction. At the same time, the dialogue established with Ginsberg's poem (Yin) interweaves the Yin-Yang principle of complementarity by preserving the subjectivity of each child. To create the work, Ai went to the earthquake region and knocked on the doors of the families of the deceased children. Due to this project, Ai was repeatedly arrested and even beaten by the police (Weiwei, 2021). The work visualizes the dialectic between passive mourning rituals (the act of knocking on families' doors) and active political inquiry (the protest regarding state responsibility), underlining the dual nature of collective trauma in China. (Figure 4) Moreover, the work navigates the ethical tension of *aestheticizing* mass trauma. From a Yin-Yang perspective, this is not a conflict but a dialectical unity; the visual vibrancy of the colorful backpacks (Yang) stands in stark balance with the cold, heavy reality of death (Yin), compelling the viewer to confront the tragedy through its visual opposite.

**Figure 4.** Ai Weiwei, *Remembering*, 2009. Installation consisting of 9,000 backpacks placed on the exterior facade of the Haus der Kunst, Munich.<sup>5</sup>



This installation of Ai Weiwei's backpacks addressed the universality of loss through a metaphorical language, combining individual mourning with collective memory. It is thought that the

---

<sup>5</sup> All visual files in this article have been used on a limited basis in content for educational, critical, or news reporting purposes, based on the "fair use" principle.

work, through Warholian serial repetitions and Ginsberg's poetic references, aimed to create a critical consciousness in the viewer on both an emotional and political level. The artist, by questioning state responsibility through memorial practices shaped within a Yin-Yang dialectic, emphasizes the transformative power of collective memory. This work, by embodying the role of art in the search for social justice, intimates the dialogue between the individual and social layers of tragedies by aestheticizing it.

Weiwei's art often involves the deconstruction of traditional Chinese art forms, such as broken porcelain or smashed Han Dynasty vases. These actions reflect the tension between respect for the past (Yin) and a critique of the current political climate (Yang). The artist's Yang side emerges with a bold, provocative, and critical stance. The act of smashing a Han Dynasty vase or the photographs of him giving the middle finger to government buildings symbolize his challenge to traditional authority and social norms. At the same time, these destructive actions can also be interpreted as a driving force (Yang) for change and renewal. The broken pieces can symbolize the idea that traditional molds must be questioned to create a new Chinese identity. His work, *Remembering*, is a massive installation containing the names of students who lost their lives in the Sichuan earthquake. This work reveals, through the Yin-Yang balance, the delicate equilibrium between mourning and loss (Yin) and the search for remembrance and accountability (Yang).

Ai Weiwei's *Sunflower Seeds* was an installation exhibited at the Tate Modern in London in 2010. The work consisted of more than 100 million life-sized, hard and cold porcelain hand-painted porcelain sunflower seeds, which were spread on the floor to a depth of approximately 30 cm. While visually creating an organic and warm texture like real seeds, the industrial rigidity of the material upon touch reflects the tension between appearance and reality. The sunflower is a symbol of Mao Zedong and Communist China, and this symbol is ubiquitous in modern Beijing as sunflower seeds are sold by street vendors throughout the city. This work drew attention to mass production practices in China, where manual labor is cheaper than mechanized labor and human rights violations exist in many factories (Lentz & Buffington, 2020). When designing this utopian project, Ai developed a relationship with a porcelain company in Jingdezhen (Jiangxi province) to produce millions of humble sunflower seeds with unique features. More than 100 million sunflowers produced for the project symbolize the humble yet unique

modeling of each individual in the sample. The true utopia implied by their germination is the creativity that a full reform is possible (Jones, 2015). Each seed was hand-shaped and painted by artisans in Jingdezhen (a Chinese city formerly known for porcelain production). The work can be interpreted as a multi-layered piece that invites viewers to think about individuality and collective behavior.

Ai's work, such as *Remembering*, also deals with the ideas of mass production and individuality. Ai noticed that with the rise of social media in China, each seed felt like an identity, as if an individual was saying something different and separate. Ai noted that when he exhibited the *Sunflower Seeds* work in Israel, Turkey, and Brazil, people started taking the seeds because they thought they were just sunflower seeds. Ai believes certain works, like *Sunflower Seeds* made in China and exhibited at the Tate, can survive in very different cultures (Weiwei, 2021). Here, the tension between individual freedom (Yin) and the culture of mass production and consumption (Yang) is emphasized. While each seed represents individuality, the mass it forms as a whole symbolizes the homogenization of society. The uniqueness of each seed (Yin) only creates that significant impact when millions of them come together (Yang). (Figure 5)

**Figure 5.** Ai Weiwei, *Sunflower Seeds*, 2010. This installation consists of more than 100 million porcelain sunflower seeds. (Location: Tate, London).<sup>6</sup>



---

<sup>6</sup> All visual files in this article have been used on a limited basis in content for educational, critical, or news reporting purposes, based on the "fair use" principle.

## **Activism as Art**

The interaction of Yin and Yang makes Ai Weiwei's activism dynamic and effective. Ai Weiwei brings his message to a global audience through international platforms and social media. His activism transcends China's borders and focuses on global human rights struggles (Mendes & Weiwei, 2022). Ai Weiwei has been subjected to persecution and oppression by the Chinese government, including his father's exile and his own arrest. These experiences led him to develop a deep understanding of injustice and the need for freedom of expression (Lentz & Buffington, 2020). He has a strong ethical foundation that feeds his art and activism. His belief in freedom of expression, transparency, and human rights shapes his form of passive resistance (Weiwei, 2021). This has undoubtedly played a significant role in shaping the thought and philosophy behind his activist actions. He often chooses to use traditional Chinese art, handmade objects, and simple materials. These choices are the result of a thoughtful and delicate approach to both Chinese culture and the universal human experience (Weiwei, 2021). He is outspoken and fearless in his criticism of the Chinese government and its policies. He does not hesitate to condemn censorship, corruption, and human rights violations (Cheng, 2011). He merges his activism with his art and organizes provocative actions and performances to draw attention and initiate discussion. For example, he transformed the demolition of his Shanghai studio into a work of art and used the River Crab metaphor to draw attention to the incompetence of the authorities (Lentz & Buffington, 2020).

Ai Weiwei's activism develops within the continuous interaction of Yin and Yang forces. The balance between thought and insight (Yin) and courageous action and defiance (Yang) gives his work a unique power and depth. The analysis of his activist side from a Yin-Yang perspective offers a broader understanding of Weiwei. His philosophical and action-oriented approaches make him one of the most influential artists and activists of our era. Through his art and activism, Weiwei is an artist who fights for human rights and fundamental freedoms in China and worldwide. The Yin-Yang philosophy offers a valuable framework for understanding his activist side and actions.

Yin represents the passive, internal, and contemplative aspects deeply embedded in Ai Weiwei's activism. Weiwei's outspokenness and criticism of the Chinese government are a defense of individual freedom and expression (Yin). Through his blog posts,



interviews, and social media shares, he actively questions censorship and oppression (Yang). The artist's activism is sometimes provocative and confrontational (Yang). Actions such as smashing a Han Dynasty vase or photographs of him giving the middle finger to government buildings carry a challenging quality beyond passive disobedience (Yin). His political stance reveals the fundamental tensions between collectivism and harmony (Yin) in China and individual rights and freedoms (Yang). His activism reflects this continuous conflict between these opposing values.

## **Discussion**

On one hand, the financialization of art and the rise of the art market mean that artists' economic activities involve efforts to produce and sell their works as commodities, to position themselves in the market, and to create exchange value. In this context, artists interact with market actors such as galleries, auction houses, and collectors, and economic success is generally measured by the market value of the works. According to Donald Kuspit, this situation transforms artists into product designers and turns aesthetics into a management discipline (Artun, 2016).

Ai Weiwei, for his part, personally introduces himself as a businessman in a program he guested on the CNN Money Channel. In the same program, he touches on the strange nature of determining the value of art and emphasizes the difficulty of determining costs and paying employees. He has adopted traditional paths to economic success (Yang) such as architectural projects (Bird's Nest Stadium) and selling artworks. These activities demonstrate his ability to build a bridge between the artistic and commercial (Yin) worlds. While critics might argue that Weiwei instrumentalizes his activist identity within the global art market (Yang), within the Yin-Yang dialectic, this is not a contradiction but a necessary complementarity. The artist's pragmatic engagement with market mechanisms (Yin) ensures the material sustainability required to disseminate his idealist political messages (Yang). Furthermore, Weiwei's economic activities are driven by his desire to protect his independence and artistic integrity (Yin). Despite government pressure, his establishment and operation of his own studio demonstrate his resistance to external influences (Yang). Weiwei tries to find harmony between artistic expression (Yin) and financial independence (Yang). His economic activities serve as a tool to both support his artistic vision and resist political pressures. The Yin-

Yang philosophy holds the idea that opposites can coexist and complement each other. The influence of this philosophy can be clearly seen in Ai Weiwei's works.

Ai Weiwei masterfully handles the tension between cultural heritage and modernity by using traditional Chinese art in a modern context. By combining traditional art forms and symbols with the dynamics of modern art, Weiwei offers viewers both an aesthetic and intellectual experience. Weiwei's activism is profoundly reflected in his art. The artist's works carry powerful messages about social justice, human rights, and freedom of expression. By using his art as a tool to instigate social change, Weiwei directs the viewer to think and question. Ai Weiwei's works have made an impact in both local and global political contexts. The artist exhibits his stance against the oppression of the Chinese government while making his voice heard on international platforms. In doing so, he turns his works into vehicles for viewers to become aware of and talk about events. In doing so, he has provided good examples of how art is an aesthetic experience and a tool for creating social impact.

As this discussion has demonstrated, analyzing Ai Weiwei's work through the Yin-Yang interpretive gaze established in the methodology reveals a consistent pattern of resolving apparent contradictions. This approach effectively frames his art, activism, and commercial ventures not as conflicting, but as complementary forces. While this study aims to read Ai Weiwei's art through the lens of Yin-Yang philosophy, it is essential not to overlook the influence of his years spent in New York or the role of other Chinese philosophies (Confucianism, Taoism). Acknowledging these other factors helps to define the specific scope of the present analysis, which deliberately focuses on the Yin-Yang framework as one powerful, though not exclusive, interpretive key.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Ai Weiwei's life and art have been approached as a dynamic example of Yin-Yang philosophy. It is also important to remember the existence of many possible interactions in the structure of the artist's works, such as the experiences he gained in the cosmopolitan environment of New York and his identity as a global citizen, the legacy of his poet father, and the influence of Chinese thought systems like Confucianism, and human nature.

This study shows that Weiwei's art, activism, and economic activities reflect the continuous tension between opposing poles such

as individual and collective, traditional and modern, and authority and freedom. The fundamental principle of Yin-Yang, the unity of opposites and the search for balance, creates a space for conflict and synthesis in Weiwei's works. Ultimately, his body of work is a testament to the power of art to weave a singular narrative from the threads of global paradox. His engagement with the art market and his commercial ventures are a powerful testament to this philosophical balance, turning the marketplace into a canvas for his anti-authoritarian message.

In this context, the Yin-Yang concept has offered a valuable analytical framework for understanding Ai Weiwei's multifaceted personality and the motivations behind his works. This study contributes a novel perspective by systematically applying this framework not merely as a background theme, but as a rigorous analytical gaze that reveals a cohesive logic within his contradictions. Therefore, Weiwei's art not only holds potential for new interdisciplinary research that intersects with Chinese philosophy and political activism, but also with consciousness practices, global commodity culture, and industrial design strategies.

## References

- Acemoğlu, D. (2021). *Sanatın özgürleşmesi: Toplumsal dönüşüm ve estetik*. [The liberation of art: Social transformation and aesthetics] Ankara: Kültür Yayınları.
- Artun, A. (2016). *Çağdaş sanatın örgütlenmesi: Estetik modernizmin tasfiyesi*. [The organization of contemporary art: The liquidation of aesthetic modernism] İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları.
- Boote, D. N., & Belie, P. (2005). Scholars before researchers: On the centrality of the dissertation literature review in research preparation. *Educational Researcher*, 34(6), 3-15.
- Cheng, M. (2011). Ai Weiwei acting is believing. *TDR The Drama Review*, 55(4), 7-13.
- Cummins, A. (2021). *The ultimate guide to yin yang*. Watkins Media Limited.
- Çalikoğlu, B. (2022). *Sanat ve toplumsal bağlam: Eleştirel bir bakış*. [Art and social context: A critical perspective] İstanbul: Sanat Yayınları.

- Demirkubuz, S. (2021). *Yeni kültürel formlar ve sanatın dönüşümü*. [New cultural forms and the transformation of art] İstanbul: Sanat Yayınları.
- Fang, T. (2012). Yin Yang: A new perspective on culture. *Management and Organization Review*, 8(1), 25–50. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1740-8784.2011.00221.x>
- Hart, C. (1998). *Doing a literature review: Releasing the social science research imagination*. Sage Publications.
- Jones, C. A. (2015). *FAKE Factory*.
- Leconte, M. (1988). *Poids idéal et bon moral Avec la méthode chinoise*. Marabout.
- Lentz, A., & Buffington, M. L. (2020). Art+ politics= activism The work of Ai Weiwei. *Art Education*, 73(1), 52-58.
- Lentz, C., & Buffington, J. (2020). Ai Weiwei and the politics of art: A critical analysis. *Art and Activism Quarterly*, 12(4 ), 78–95.
- Liu, H. H., Nichols, C., & Zhang, H. (2023). Understanding Yin-yang philosophic concept behind Tai Chi practice. *Holistic Nursing Practice*, 37(5), 75–82.
- Mendes, A. C. (2022). The world as a readymade a conversation with Ai Weiwei. *Transnational Screens*, 13(2), 157-175.
- Mendes, A., & Weiwei, A. (2022). *Ai Weiwei speaks: Art, activism, and identity*. Thames & Hudson.
- Rose, G. (2022). *Visual methodologies: An introduction to researching with visual materials* (5th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Weiwei, A. (2021). *Conversations*. . Columbia University Press.
- Wolff, J. (2021). *Aesthetics and the Sociology of Art*. Routledge. .

## Figure References

- Figure 1.** Wikimedia Commons. (2021, October 23). *Yin yang* [Image file].  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Yin\\_yang.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Yin_yang.svg)
- Figure 2.** Ai, W. (1995). *Dropping a Han dynasty urn* [Photograph]. Smarthistory. <https://smarthistory.org/ai-weiwei-dropping-a-han-dynasty-urn-2/>

**Figure 3.** Ai, W. (2007). *Fairytale* [Installation]. Ocula. <https://ocula.com/art-galleries/galerie-urs-meile/artworks/ai-weiwei/fairytale-chairs/>

**Figure 4.** Ai, W. (2009). *Remembering* [Installation]. Smarthistory. <https://smarthistory.org/ai-weiwei-remembering-and-the-politics-of-dissent/>

**Figure 5.** Ai, W. (2010). *Sunflower seeds* [Installation]. Tate Modern. <https://smarthistory.org/ai-weiwei-remembering-and-the-politics-of-dissent/>

### **Author Biography**

Melih Can Toygu is an academic and designer from Eskişehir. He completed his undergraduate degree in fashion design at Anadolu University while minoring in industrial design. He holds master's degrees in two different fields. In his master's thesis on Fashion Design at Anadolu University, he examined the contribution of costume and set design to dramaturgy, and in his master's thesis on Marketing at Osmangazi University, he studied the marketing of yoga events.

Toygu has worked as a lecturer at numerous institutions, including Anadolu, Atılım, and Osmangazi universities. He also serves as a costume designer and production assistant at Anadolu University. He has experience as an art director on short films.

A certified yoga and qigong instructor, Toygu integrates his work in art and design with physical and spiritual practices. His published articles include topics such as the interpretation of cultural heritage through art and the role of artificial intelligence in art.

For correspondence: [mecete@gmail.com](mailto:mecete@gmail.com)

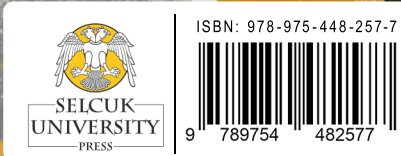
# **NEW CULTURAL FORMS: Artistic Narratives and Contemporary Expressions-1**

Editor

Assoc. Prof. N. Mge SELUK

New Cultural Forms: Artistic Narratives and Contemporary Expressions is a comprehensive study that examines the new forms contemporary art has taken today through an interdisciplinary lens. Spanning topics from consumption aesthetics to performance art, from gender politics to ethical responsibility, the volume explores the multilayered structure of contemporary art through artists such as Warhol, Abramović, Neshat, Saville, Salgado, and Ai Weiwei.

This work serves as a strong and reliable international resource for researchers, students, and art enthusiasts seeking to understand artistic productions intertwined with current cultural debates.





**NEW CULTURAL FORMS:  
Artistic Narratives and Contemporary Expressions-1**

Editor

Assoc. Prof. N. Müge SELÇUK

New Cultural Forms: Artistic Narratives and Contemporary Expressions is a comprehensive study that examines the new forms contemporary art has taken today through an interdisciplinary lens. Spanning topics from consumption aesthetics to performance art, from gender politics to ethical responsibility, the volume explores the multilayered structure of contemporary art through artists such as Warhol, Abramović, Neshat, Saville, Salgado, and Ai Weiwei.

This work serves as a strong and reliable international resource for researchers, students, and art enthusiasts seeking to understand artistic productions intertwined with current cultural debates.



New Cultural Forms 1

Editor: Assoc. Prof. N. Müge SELÇUK



2025

# New Cultural Forms:

Artistic Narratives and Contemporary Expressions

Editor

Assoc. Prof. N. Müge SELÇUK

