

THE SPHINX WILL DEVOUR YOU!

The Background of the Exhibition

Women artists have been producing assertive, attractive and probing works since the mid eighties, and currently they are receiving the international attention. Still, one cannot deny the male dominant discourse within the modern and postmodern theory and practice. Women struggle to get their economic and social identities accepted in Turkey where traditional structures still prevail along with the transitions of postmodern processes. Postmodern phase is a break for women but it is not an easy task to change the status quo. We know that to improve the condition of the outcast or repressed individuals – and women of any class and occupation make up a majority of these- we must deconstruct the meta-narratives; to be able to do this, the modernist mentality and structure of the masses and institutions has to be radically changed. Within this context, the probing, questioning, and shocking examples of contemporary art works carry an important mission and among them, the sharing, communicative, flexible and contributive qualities of women artists' works produce favorable results.

In Turkey, although we can't yet refer to an active arts related organization of an attitude/movement on behalf of women artists -in spite of the momentum gained by non-governmental civil organizations since the early 90's-, we have to distinguish the importance of the productions of women artists in quality and quantity. Their appearance on the art scene has been sporadic and singular rather than aiming and in contribution with each other; more over, we can even trace the dominant pattern of women artists who appear in exhibitions monitored by male artists. We cannot speak of a feminist art or the female identity expressed as a political manifesto through art works in the past, nor within late or early modernisms. Early modernists like Mihri Müşfik, Hale Asaf or late modernists like Şükriye Dikmen, Fahrel Nissa Zeid, Aliye Berger, Füreyya, were not reviewed as avant guards; they were not considered as competing with men. On the threshold of post-modernism, in the 70's, Fusun Onur, a most significant artist at that time was creating fragile works which could be qualified as Arte Povera. In the 80's Nur Kocak was painting photo realist images of women as fetish-objects, or Jale Erzen and Hale Arpacıoglu were displaying the neo-expressionist woman figure in their work. However, they were not assessed by the society as part of a women's liberation movement or as in search of a new identity. Yet, one should evaluate these works as pilgrim representations of the post-modern women's identity. The manifestations of this new identity surfaced slowly, gradually within the post-modern process; its progress became noticeable in the 90's with participations of artists like Handan Borutecene, Ayse Erkmén, Inci Eviner, Gulsun Karamustafa, Canan Beykal, Canan Tolon, Şükran Aziz , Şükran Moral and Hale Tenger at local and international exhibitions. Since the mid 90's and until today we can state that, this process gained momentum with a large group of artists with various social backgrounds and strong identity statements. The works of Sermin Sherif, Ozgul Arslan, Seyda Cesur, Elif Celebi, Esra Ersen, Gül Ilgaz, Neriman Polat, Gonca Sezer, Canan Senol, Mukadder Simsek,

Cemile Kaptan, Yasemin Özcan Kaya are crossing borders and breaking taboos with their works. The territories these artists trespass is wide; employing tools of sociology and psychoanalysis, they frequently address the paternal family, sexual repression, sins, accusations, exploitation of children and women, the use of commercials and consumer economy of women as fetish image and object, the mind-body conflicts.

Then again, it is apparent that the majority of the public and those who govern the cultural institutions do not properly appraise such productions.

During the 20th century, within those societies who have slipped into modernism by default and not by consciousness, Modern Art has been qualified as a high structure, thus losing its power of affecting the mass. In such countries where the infrastructure of uniting the mass with criticism and serious culture is lacking, we can observe that post-modern art suffers its share of this alienation as well. It is not surprising that the artists continue to struggle against the conservative public opinion and the institutions that deny the political, social and critical context of post-modern art, which in return can only nourish itself from life's actuality. Thus, one should not expect a society with little appreciation of the signs and forewarning of art productions in general, to distinguish the diversity and multiplicity of the works of women artists.

On the other hand, who can really compete or get even with and gain territory on the consumer culture and the media? The women artists who are already struggling against paternalistic systems, not being within decision-making circles and being continuously deterred from actualizing their projects, also have to stand up against – with no backing force of the mass behind them- the media and the consumer culture which treat the female identity as a rag doll. In any case, neither in this country nor in other similar countries, the art production has been included in the feminist discourse anyway. Frankly, the majority of the women artists have gained the strong grounds they are standing on through their participations to international circles and through the possibilities, these initiatives have provided. However, the female identity manifestations and the feminist content in art works are regarded as outdated contents. The interpreters of the works of Vanessa Beecroft, who present nude models as “still life”, or of Shirin Neshat, who casts women in veil as main performers in her videos, do not use the term “feminism” when referring to these works. They use other “isms”. At this point, the strategy of not frightening the art market surfaces wins through; because the global capitalist system does not fancy revolts in the name of the society. Evidently, both in Christian and in Muslim societies, it is no doubt that the “female identity” is the speculation territory of male chauvinistic politics and rulers.

Today, in Turkey, the “female panorama” is chaotic, blurry and depending on the context, scary. We are living in an environment where young girls of age 13 assaulted and marked as “stained woman” are victims of their families. TV programs recklessly exploit and castrate physically and mentally immature, uneducated girls for false fame and image. Women with no “face” or “body”, all covered in black are used as slave-mistresses. Even those who are educated are unable to find their place and identity within the society, family, and private life, amongst male dominant negotiations. Within this environment, women can only take “the permitted and proposed place” in politic, economic and cultural fields. From time to time, they can make their voice heard and

attain their objective. Women go on filling the gaps of competence among each other as expected of them. Still there is something lacking which is hard to name. Especially during these times of shifts and changes in Turkey, this lack is that of the lack of women's designated status to effect, to shape, to change the current social, political, economic and cultural systems and that such rights have never been given to them. Exactly for this reason, to turn our gaze, where we can see such power as a metaphor, is essential at least for getting a mental satisfaction. This space is the space of the women artists' productions.

The Subconscious of the Exhibition

"The Sphinx will devour you!" addresses the deconstruction of the female/male identity and their status within this background.

A sphinx is half woman-half lion with breasts and wings. When we look up the definition of sphinx, it means "to strangle, guard; gatekeeper or protect". Paradoxal terms unified in one image! The sphinx is a grecian myth and since ages, is a major part of masonry which is a male secret society. Again an ambiguous analogy. According to the greeks, the sphinx was a guardian of the city of Thebes. She sat on a cliff in front of the gates leading to the city. Anyone that wanted to enter Thebes had to first confront the sphinx. The sphinx would ask one simple riddle and if the person didn't know the answer, she would devour him, tearing him to pieces. The king, Creon, was troubled that many people were unable to enter his city. He consulted Oedipus and offered his crown and his daughter if he could kill the sphinx. So he confronted the sphinx who asked him the riddle, "What has one voice, and goes on four feet on two feet and on three, but the more feet it goes on the weaker it be?" Oedipus responded, "Man, who crawls on all fours as a baby, then walks on two as an adult, and walks with a cane in old age." After answering the riddle correctly, the sphinx committed suicide, jumping off the cliff and Oedipus was claimed king of Thebes.

Symbolically, the body signifies the animal nature, which exists in women in the form of the lion, which is the royalty, and power of the divine spirit that has been mythologically attributed to women as mother goddess. The riddle represents the knowledge and intelligence inherent in women. Metaphorically speaking, the sphinx conveys its knowledge and intelligence to men by destroying its lower animal nature and bestows him the refinement of the thought process that leads to the spiritual evolution of man. By solving the riddle, Oedipus (the man) became master problem-solver. Curiously enough we again have to deal with a male triumph.

The Sphinx is one of the most striking monuments of the ancient Egyptians, and has attracted the attention of travellers, scientists, archaeologists and others for generations. The Sphinx had a philosophical impact on the ancient world, on Arab writers, on Renaissance travellers, on the pioneers of Egyptology and on modern scholarship and theory. Yet, it is not a figure in the Islamic conception, because it signifies the female identity.

This episode in Oedipus's mythology is the turning point in Oedipus's fate which led him to kill his father and sleep with his mother. Freud describes the source of this complex in his *Introductory Lectures* (Twenty-First Lecture):

"You all know the Greek legend of King Oedipus, who was destined by fate to kill his father and take his mother to wife, who did everything possible to escape the oracle's decree and punished himself by blinding when he learned that he had none the less unwittingly committed both these crimes."

To explain the early psychodrama of childhood, Freud turned to a dramatic work, Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, in which Oedipus attempts to escape his fate. However, in the process, where the confrontation with the sphinx is the key event, he unintentionally does the very things he was attempting to avoid. Freud therefore invented the term Oedipus Complex.

Lacan - the successor of Freud - has developed his Mirror Stage on the Oedipus complex. Within his famous theories "the woman does not exist" fits in to the context of the title "the sphinx will devour you".

Paul Verhaeghe in his article named "Neurosis and Perversion" points up to the story of the Sphinx and sums up the whole complexity (*): Freud studied the differences and the sexual relationship between man and woman using the Oedipus metaphor. Freud was convinced that a normal relationship was possible, but ended up with castration anxiety and penis envy or passivity, hence indicating a biological block. Lacan stated that there is no sexual rapport and that the woman does not exist. Both came up with a pessimistic conclusion. Along with the differences, they have a common denominator; which is anxiety. Both sexes, although expressing differently, suffer an anxiety of the same origin. According to Freud, the anxiety at the base of human sexuality was nothing else but castration anxiety. That castration anxiety is not the original primary form of anxiety, but an elaborate version of it. Lacan, on the other hand says that anxiety originates from a fundamental lack/void. Human desire is a longing for the forever-lost pre-lingual mutual life (symbiosis).

According to Verhaeghe, the position of the woman in this relationship between anxiety and this lack of original symbiosis is important. Primarily the woman is structurally the "other" who is dangerous and devouring. As the archetype, she is the original first mother and has the right of reclaiming what is originally hers and so she can recreate the pure "jouissance. This is the fundamental dilemma of sexuality; each subject craves for what he fears, that is the original pleasure. The primary defense against this fear is the attaching of the idea of castration onto this threatening figure. Lacan describes this with such a metaphor: *The mother is a big crocodile in whose mouth you are; one doesn't know what she's up to, eventually she can even close her jaws. That is the desire of the mother. However, there is a stone between her teeth, and this stone keeps the jaws apart. This stone is the phallus. It is what keeps you safe, if suddenly the jaws were to close.*

This recalls the Sphinx and the riddle: If you do not answer correctly, the Sphinx will devour you. In reality, all women are the victims of the Sphinx. The woman as a subject confronts this threatening figure, then again as a female she has invested in the fear for this figure.

Freud did not have a chance to explore beyond what he conceived as biological facts, but Lacan treats the matter in its ethical and creative dimensions. According to Lacan, *The woman does not exist neither does the man.* Both of them can deconstruct and

reconstruct their identity during an analysis, in which they share the same experience. That is the experience of their identity and lack of identity being a defensive imaginary construction. This defense is against the feared desire of the "other".

Verhaeghe ends his article with crucial questions: "One initially answers an ethical question: Which position do I consciously want in view of the desire of the other and in which direction will I develop my own answers in view of the lack in the symbolic system, answers that will constitute my identity?"

I doubt that women and men in Turkey and in all male dominated societies ever ask these questions to themselves. Within the framework of Turkey and the current ambiguous and confusing status of Islam here, it is essential to bring up the famous proposition of Lacan "Woman does not exist" to the discussion and one could also propose from ground zero variations like "Woman exists" or "Man does not exist as well" or "Man also exists".

In his interpretation of this theory, Slavoj Žižek says: "Existence" is a linguistic term, it means things, which can be referred to, and this is the opposite of Lacan's concept of "the real", which is the unspeakable. Therefore, what exists is only what linguistically is "represented", or, more accurately, referenced. If not mentioned, or cannot be mentioned, it does not exist. Likewise, enjoyment is necessarily dumb. Therefore, "the woman" cannot exist in language. Why? Lacan is trying to simply describe a situation neutrally, and he describes a patriarchy dominated world where women don't get into language, thus do not exist". **

We know that in non-democratic, semi-democratic as well as democratic societies the gender ideologies and relations are based into two clear-cut groups, women and men, where in most societies men absolutely dominate the women, giving no room for choice, difference and resistance.

Judith Butler's preference of "transformation of historical and anthropological positions that understand gender as a relation among socially constituted subjects in specifiable contexts" has not happened yet. Quoting her words, there are still fixed attributes in a person, gender is not yet a fluid variable which shifts and changes in different contexts and at different times. One of the most hegemonic fields within this context is the media, which disseminates alternative images and places the women to the center of the war of symbols as the defeated subject. We are in the age of the electronic media, as signifier of the male gaze and ego.

Butler showed that "gender is not just a social construct, but rather a kind of performance, a show we put on, a set of signs we wear, as costume or disguise". Within the neocapitalist "lifestyle" discourse the performance/show of women is a substance for pure commodity. She indicated that in Western discourse, "woman" is always the other of "man", hence excluded from culture or the Symbolic and in feminist theory, "woman" is universal category, which thus excludes differences of race, class, or sexuality. In fundamentalist Islamic societies, the woman is not even "the other", she is the simple tool of ideology. Accordingly, the feminist theory in non- and semi-democratic countries became an extension of male dominated state policy. This leaves the majority of the society no way but to think about women as fragmentations and disjointed subjects.***

As to the riddle, with its classification of childhood, youth and old age, it also represents the fate of human hood shifting from dependence (crawling) to independence (walking) and back to dependent status (walking with a cane) it really relates us to the main conflict in neoliberal capitalism today. In our societies there are those who produce and those who do not or cannot. The ones who produce are rewarded with a welfare life and the rest are left to poverty and deprivation; among these children and women are the ones who most of the time suffer.

The title "Sphinx will devour you!" also claims to be the critical manifesto within the scope of the current social awareness about the scary position of women, which is extremely irresolute. Finally, this title, by referring to Lacan and psychoanalysis, aims to attract the attention to postmodern psychoanalytical theories in conjunction with art productions. In the age of electronic images we are predisposed to perceive and face the world in fictions and fictional representations. We are obliged to identify "the self" in images. Art, collaborating with psychoanalysis and in its resistant forms seems to be the only juxtaposition to the media, electronic images and male hegemony. The people are also contented with the representations in paintings and other forms of art, where they can see definite significations and cohesive subjects – even if the representations reflect the uncanny, the abject, the transgress. In our struggle for coherence, art forms help us to imagine the undivided subject. The art became a realm in which we are reassured that there are integrated subjects within this world.

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**Verhaeghe P., Neurosis and Perversion: Il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel, in Journal of The Center for Freudian Analysis and Research, 6 Winter 95, s. 39-63 – presented at the CFAR, London, May 1995*

***Slavoj Jijek: <http://arts.ucsc.edu/sdaniel/pagemillpages/rightsideupmartha.html>*

****Essay by Sally Young for the level one elective COMM1510, 1998. Is Judith Butler's approach to gender politics an improvement on previous forms of feminism?
<http://www.theory.org.uk/ctr-b-e1.htm>*