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## The body that contemporary art fragments

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### Abstract

Along with the history of humankind, the adorable female body which ensures the continuity of the human race has been a field where the socio-cultural structure can be read in a contemporary art. The body, which was preliminarily a whole and a material for aesthetic categories, starkly began to get fragmented with wars in the 17th Century Europe and following the war, with egalitarian, liberal formations of 1968 movement. During the course of the change from modernism to post-modernism, the chaotic structure caused by global lifestyles made it inevitable to review the existing genres. The world wars, genocides that many scientists and artists left their countries, escaping from invasions, the regional and mass destruction, threat, violence and the anxiety caused by them; the fear, the politicisation, racism, poverty, migration, marginalisation, deterritorialisation, discrimination that started during especially the 1980s, have been concepts that were considered with a poststructuralist point-of-view.

**Keywords:** Body, art, female, gender, violence.

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## **1. The body that contemporary art fragments**

The female body as an art material is primarily known as the fertility goddess, a holy representation, academically a subject of art history, an aesthetic ideal on which the concepts of the plastic arts (like light and shade, space and mass) are experimented and compositions are built.

Body in arts is a way of seeing, a western tradition, as indicated by John Berger. According to this view, nude body for an artist is not really a living creature, but it is a poser and a design which takes form with light. Nude women in art history strike almost the same pose in Ancient Greek sculptures, tombs, reliefs and frescos. Similar postures were also available in Renaissance. Some of them are famous nudes; for instance, Goya's 'Nude Maja'.

Since the 1960s, the body has been considered as a subject to feminist-based movements that challenge the traditional boundaries of art history which considers it a beautiful, naked object. The body which is shaped by the potency now, revolts against being marginalised as a cultural and historical fiction, 'male dominance' and exclusion. Especially by female artists, body started to be studied through identity politics, subject-object dynamics. This unravelling rereads the aesthetic, ideal body by almost removing woman's veil in Europe, USA and Turkey, almost fragmenting it, through critical strategies of contemporary art practice and pastiche, irony, parody, intertextuality, appropriation which are the terms of postmodernism.

Especially during the years following the 1968 movement, the area of interest of art has diversified; it got beyond the boundaries of the standardised individuals of western culture and got closer to third world countries. The marginal groups, blacks, homosexuals, women, who made themselves visible, lead art politically against gender, racism and discrimination. In the egalitarian, liberal rises lead by 68 movement, a point-of-view that developed in the frame of the concept of 'I' stands out. The feminism-oriented identity brings the concept of discrimination up for discussion along with itself. The negative situations caused by the living conditions of the ones who live in the suburbs, outskirts, ethnic groups, outsiders start the resistance against art and all its institutions. Against the supremacy, uniqueness, centralisation of modernism, the concepts of pluralism, eclectic, pastiche, parody, irony and cynicism take hold. The idea of an object that is created in a particular way, objects with attributed value and the potency is challenged. After 1970, it has been observed that the anger against the distress caused by the potency has turned into destruction and an element of revolt against the theory of modernity and that its extensions are targeted in arts and turned into elements that contain subversion and violence. The politics against this discrimination find their equivalents in arts and body, as the body is a field where concepts like identity can be used by the authority. Therefore, the body is political. While the approaches after 1980 have focused on the body and have criticised all kinds of interventions to the body; concepts like memory, place, identity came into play and moving away from 'private space', 'public space' started to be criticised. Private space and public space intersect in the body. Public space and body have become the object of art which was criticised by potency. Artists have started to produce artworks that address sexual assaults, preferences, cultural differences, by using their bodies. Body and everything it represents have been questioned. Fragmentations, distortions, wounding the self in front of the audience and bloody performances have turned into art objects which have been represented by depressions and hidden truths.

## **2. Artists in Turkey and in the world**

The egalitarian, liberal rises of 1968 movement did not develop simultaneously with Europe in our country. While the organised movements, initiatives were on the rise in the 1980s; exploitation of female body labour, its perception through object-subject dynamics and the discussion on these processes accelerated, especially after the 1990s. However, while the modernist break out in Turkish plastic arts in the 1970s was being questioned both from the aspect of material and media experiments and the social construction and cultural, psychological background; albeit at the stage of curiosity, gender, class and ethnicity entered into arts by especially being addressed by female artists. In this

context, Canan Beykal, Gulsun Karamustafa, Nur Kocak, Nil Yalter and Fusun Onur can be mentioned as good examples. Nil Yalter's video called 'Bassiz Kadin ya da Gobek Dansi' (the headless woman or the belly dance) is a significant artwork created through the body. In the performance during which the artist makes use of her own body, Rene Nelli's words from his book 'Erotique et Civilisations', "A veritable woman is 'convex' and 'concave' at the same time" are cited and written on her belly. This work both refers to a tradition in Anatolia that women have magical, enchanted words written on their bellies to increase their fertility and a criticism against female circumcision which is still ongoing in some parts of Africa.

Also in Fusun Onur's works, the selected materials and the readymade objects, forms can be perceived as male and female by the society as they are encoded. For example, while armchair and chair are perceived as male, Fusun Onur emphasises femininity via the tulle, covers, plastic dolls she employs. Again during the same years, plastic dolls that were hung on rear-view mirrors of vehicles, female bodies mounted on gear-sticks, nude female figures on playing cards were consumption objects through which female body turns into an ornament in daily life. By making incisions on the body of a plastic doll, Fusun Onur creates a feeling of fragmentation. In contrast with Turkish contemporary art in which woman is being glorified, she was interested in decoding the gender fictions in traditional art history.

After the 1990s, many young Turkish female artists have produced artworks on female identity, female image, manners, migration and female body through photography, video and performances.

Gulsun Karamustafa's work, in which she encircled a male mannequin wearing a nightgown, with green and red matchwoods, displays gender and fragmented identity which appears neither as male nor as female. This work is neither a sculpture nor a mannequin, but it alternates between life and art.

In the West, after 1960's, especially female artists subverted particular cultural codes of female body and identity; they played with the concept of object-subject. They started to produce a new art history from ideological systems like feminism, psychoanalysis, semiotics. Art production, feminine sensitivity, fragility of female artists and material oriented detections they use were reversed. In 1971, in California Art Institute, Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro generated new thematic expressions for the first time on the idea that the life experiences of women create a new artistic content and the aesthetic form will be determined by this new content. From then on, the passive environment where cultural meanings on the female body have been dealt with has gone beyond the prototype which relies on alienation, solely touching life stories and female sensitivity. The body itself takes the risk of being fragmented. Yoko Ono's work called 'Cut Piece' in 1964, Gina Pane's self-portraits in which she made bleed her own body with different methods, Marina Abramovich's letting the audience wound and intervene with her body by giving them sharp tools and again Abramovich's attempt to take the risk of blowing her head out with a loaded gun put on her head and her project of playing Russian roulette were actually the violence committed on the female body by the women themselves as well as being a metaphor for the social oppression they were exposed to. Hannah Wilke, who did not take human and female body traditionally and died from cancer at an early age, can also be counted among those female artists. Judy Chicago also experiences the image of violence through the female body in her work called 'The Dinner Party'. In her fragmented sculptures that look like a cadaver, Kiki Smith subverts the symbolic order with an anatomic, almost a clinic point-of-view; she presents the despicable, the hideous, sourly includes a human being's journey from her birth to death in the artistic environment. Czechoslovak artist Jana Sterbak deals with sexuality and identity issues in her work called 'Skirt Steak' which is a cloth made of pieces of meat.

In 2014, a different, alternative exhibition took place in Istanbul. Inspired by Goya's etching, the title of the exhibition was 'The Sleep of Reason'. The artist, who exhibits the private and familiar sides of the body, turns his artworks into curiosity objects by using materials like meat, bone and blood. Marc Quinn represents the life and death cycle with meat and bone paintings which do not correspond with the aesthetic ideal. While painting the still lives through a kind of biopsy by taking

the photo of a piece of a cut out lamb meat, actually he aims to drill a hole into the human body and take out a piece of meat and discover the geography of the body, the beginning, the very first. The most sensational work of the artist is his self-portrait made with his own blood. He used 4–5 L of his own blood in that work. Through his self-portrait which was displayed in a special liquid in  $-18^{\circ}$ , he experiences our contradictions about the body by taking out the blood from the body and exhibiting it. Those contradictions are fear of losing the body and death, inside and outside, subject and object or basically life and art. Another series of the artist is called 'The Complete Marbles'. He picks models from real life; individuals who have lost their limbs. He takes the beautiful women figures, which took place in art history and represent the aesthetic ideal, lying on the pedestal with familiar poses down and replaces them with those mentioned sculptures. Thus, he talks about a confusing relationship among the sculptures we encounter in museums with broken limbs, arms and heads as they cannot resist time. If we admire the broken ones in the museums, why should not we admire these?

The fragmented bodies originate from 17th Century Europe. That was a period when public places were ruined, people were guillotined and a huge social deterioration emerged in Europe. Francisco Gericault often used human limbs, morgues, guillotined arms, legs and heads in his paintings. John Berger's evaluation which can be a resource for sociological analysis of the body is interesting: in his 1972 book called 'Ways of Seeing' he says 'Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at' (Goodreads, t.y.).

Today, the representation of a fragile female body is almost as old as the history of humankind. Unavoidably, women look at their bodies and use it as a material of art in patriarchal societies because of the religious oppression, pain, violence and suppression.

### 3. Conclusion

In the early 20th Century, most of the radical art movements dealt primarily with discrimination; the 'others' who were ignored by modernity were reproduced by body's coded identity symbols. The body which was primarily kept in confinement of modernity and looked at solely as naked, 'nude', to some extent liberates itself from sexist oppressions and speaks up. On the other hand, it benefits from commercial goods like plastic surgery and fashion. Sometimes the body also becomes virtual with the influence of computer technology and mass media. Deluze and Guattari propose the 'limbless body' which represents an anarchic formation against the coded perception of body. Their limbless body is both female and male without gender and it is nonhuman. The idea is that female identity draws feminists' reactions. However, what Guattari defends is not to erase female sexuality or identity, but is the idea that the concepts of class, race and gender are under the custody of identity. According to them, the female movement should not be limited or held in the hands of the potency and must be against any kind of order and system.

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