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A Conversation on Exhibitions and Cultural Worlds, with Serdar Arat

Vasif Kortun and Serdar Arat

Two recent exhibitions in New York, ‘Calligraphic Abstraction’ (MoMA), and ‘Dialogues: Modern Artists and The Ottoman Past’ (MET), impacted me, as an artist of Turkish origin, in a strongly visceral way and left me with a complex and troubling initial response, which Nilüfer İsvan, a close friend, confirmed as *Pride and Prejudice*: First, *finally*, Turkish modern/contemporary art on prominent display in the permanent collections of MoMA and the MET, where both museums are incorporating a comparative experience (‘Pride’). Next, *sadly*, calligraphy and other easily recognisable cultural/historical symbols and approaches still identify ‘Turkish’ art, perpetuating age-old stereotypes (‘Prejudice’). This has deeply troubled me since the 1970s, and its current resonances continue to sink my heart. To settle my initial emotional response, I wrote to Vasif Kortun, a longtime friend for his perspective and wisdom. I am deeply grateful that he engaged me in the following conversation.

Serdar Arat

A recurring theme in SWANA art was the interplay between nationalist sentiment, the retention of cultural legacy and decolonisation. Every region possesses heritage ammunition, and calligraphy often served a purpose. Or, in Egyptian art, artists frequently drew upon the country’s Pharonic past or depicted traditional life along the Nile as a recurrent, timeless trope. Navigating the complexities of heritage and cultural claims can be a delicate matter. Western institutions’ way of embracing and integrating diverse expressions of modernity can also be questionable. The MET show, in particular, repeats the clichés of undiscerning

local art establishments and their inadequate art histories.¹ The processes involved, not the exhibitions' contents, piqued my initial interest.

Vasif Kortun

Vasif Kortun Dear Serdar, years have come and gone. I remember our first years in New York, the second half of the 1980s. In a much more carefree world, we looked at the world from two different places simultaneously, from the centre and the margins, like those who have come before us. Before discussing the recent MET and MoMA shows in New York,² I thought about zooming out a bit.

You may know that I was occupied for many years by a particular gap between the acts of looking and reading, as I thought cognitively, culturally, and physically – in terms of bodily experience – they could not be brought to the same plane. I was particularly keen on the possibilities of this gap. There is a difference between how we organise our body in the original context of looking at an illuminated manuscript on a *rable*,³ close to the ground, individually. This, of course, rhymes with the Quran, which, as a word, is derived from reading. That something is experienced individually is vital here. You know what I am getting at; when we take that experience, put it on a wall, approximately at eye level, standing up, normalised by the consistency of everything else shown, subjected to the same discipline, what are we doing? I will claim that much more is at stake here than 'contextualisation'.

Before we dig deeper, I also want to bring into the discussion a remark a brilliant colleague, young Iraqi art historian Amin Alsaden, made when I was conversing with him recently. Amin has been entirely preoccupied with some Turkish artists, such as Emin Barin and Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu during his research trip in Istanbul. Anyway, we were speculating on how to exhibit the work of Barin because he felt it had been mishandled at a recent exhibition.⁴ I was also approaching the issue from another angle to converge at the same point. The exhibitionary model we inherited from the world fairs and European museum histories inevitably pulls every artifact to its habitus and articulates it from that angle. We know all of that already. The next question is, then, how we can produce models of sharing that also reimagine its context to help the artifact in question realise its potentiality. It can also be a structure of estrangement, with the person experiencing the artifact, perhaps their exteriority to it, where they can no longer claim the privilege of the onlooker. Our conversation with Amin simply involved looking at other ways of experiencing. He mentioned in that context that the Nûreddin Cerrâhî tekke in Fatih, Istanbul, has an additive, non-hierarchical display.

These are a few remarks that, I guess, make something more promising and meaningful from the banality of the MET exhibition.

Serdar Arat Dear Vasif, with our first word, we are in the depths of this conversation. My hand writes 'dear', but my mind wants 'Vasıfçığım' (or, as my Iranian friends would say, Vasif can – all meaning 'Dear Vasif', for our English readers). Using a different language means wanting to 'bend'

1 In the interview with Benjamin Buchloh, Jean Hubert Martin said, 'In these countries you find a widespread tendency to harmonize traditional calligraphy with Ecole de Paris painting, and the work is technically often quite remarkable. I have to admit, however, that this type of work does not particularly interest me. It is too fabricated, and one knows all too well how it came about.' 'The Whole Earth Show', *Art in America*, July, 1989, p 158. Nobody dares speak of Jean Hubert-Martin's bold assertion. It implicates the local power elites, their gatekeeping practices, and the kind of nationalist middle class they were empowered by. However, we could discuss if calligraphy were an acceptable heritage cure mounted on to the European canvas tradition without falling into the traps of essentialism. The question may not be about who 'owns' calligraphy or Ecole de Paris as cultural traditions but how they operate in each context.

2 'Dialogues: Modern Artists and the Ottoman Past', 3 November – 30 June, 2024

3 *Rable* is a lectern, a book holder that one uses sitting directly on the floor.

4 <https://sanatokur.com/emin-barin-ne-senden-ruku-nenden-kiyam-sergisi-acildi/>

the English language to match my ‘Turkish’ psyche at every turn, and if I’ve been doing this since 1980, the year of my arrival in NY, I guess I’ll always do it. If a simple word ‘hello’ is rooted in our profoundly culture-shaped psyche, then one can imagine the mind and soul ‘bending’ that goes on in viewing Ottoman/Islamic calligraphic texts on the walls of public exhibition spaces. I suspect other ‘gaps’ will be added to the one you point out between ‘looking and reading’ during our conversation. I’m very interested in your thoughts on traversing this and possibly other ‘gaps’ in an exhibition setting.

I’m also glad that you brought up the Emin Barin exhibition, as he was the first to come to mind at the recent calligraphy-related exhibitions at MoMA and the MET. Barin’s works in the Feshane exhibition, though I have seen them only from online images, seem to suffer terribly from ‘display-pyrographics’ – wall colours, sizeable wall texts and photographs, wide open and very high-ceilinged spaces, and others. Although Amin Alsaden’s suggestion of Cerrâhî tekke as an alternative venue is intriguing, I would consider a few possible caveats. The Tekke tradition of self-discipline and spiritual aesthetics would be perfect parallels to the creative life of a master calligrapher. However, the tekke setting may also drown out another major accomplishment of Barin: Expanding the cultural context of ‘Turkish’ calligraphy to include the secular/republican/modern. My point here is one of creativity and not ideology, but still, this gets us to the cultural politics of the day, which I can’t possibly gauge.

As a possible alternative ‘model of sharing’, I thought of the MET Islamic Galleries’ permanent exhibition of Persian/Iranian manuscript paintings, which you know very well. These individually separated pages of the Shahname are exhibited, each with ample space around it, in low-lying, upright, wood and glass display cases. They have a slightly angled, narrow armrest panel alongside the glass and a stool to pull up to the display case for a more intimate experience of these exquisitely painted pages. A distinctly different alternative to standing up in front of a work displayed on the wall, one closer to experiencing a manuscript on a ‘rahle’, close to the ground, individually, in your words.

Indeed, the overall architectural design of the MET Islamic Art Galleries incorporates ‘Islamic’ architectural details, materials, and methods, which also helps create a sense of authenticity and cultural context. At the same time, we are well aware of being in an environment that is quite different than the authentic character of the Cerrâhî Tekke, where we are at all times conscious of the fact that this entire experience is an abstraction, a collective imagining by way of authentic artworks; that we are in the ‘gap space’ where we have to re-create the experience on an individual basis. I find this a more sober way of experiencing art, which can be better achieved in a usual exhibition venue, even one like the Feshane if done thoughtfully. Comparatively, a venue such as Cerrâhî tekke comes with its loaded context, likely to impose its loaded character on the artworks exhibited within it.

Here, I would like to give two examples of what you so sensitively termed ‘to help the artifact in question realise itself, its potentiality’. The first is Jeff Koons’s works at the Versailles Palace, displaying only a few pieces scattered in a vast space that comes with a loaded history



MET Islamic Art Galleries (Not to be viewed in the manner of this viewer), photograph: Serdar Arat

but provides the perfect cultural context for works about extreme luxury-kitsch.

The second is the modern/contemporary artworks displayed at the MET Islamic Galleries. The historical artworks and objects in the MET Islamic Collection are primarily decorative and functional, a quality that reflects on the few Modern/Contemporary pieces displayed among them. Although this may be a favourable context for many of the Modern/Contemporary pieces in this exhibition, at least in Burhan Dogañay's case, it works 'against helping realise the work's potentiality', as you put it.

Regarding the 'gap' between 'looking' and 'reading' that has kept you engaged for years, we should consider the following. When Islamic cultures lifted the written word off the intimacy of the page to make wall panels out of them or to wrap entire buildings with sheer calligraphic skins, they created an entirely new visual experience in the 'gap' between looking and reading. It seems that viewers of all kinds and times quickly learn to bridge gaps like these by the force of imagination, practicing another type of 'mind and soul bending'. I believe that it is this practice that makes viewing a creative – or re-creative process in and of itself.

Likewise, new viewing experiences continue to be created. If two centuries ago the idea of exhibiting a handwritten Kuran was unimaginable,



Jeff Koons, *Balloon Dog* (1994–2000), installation view from the exhibition *Jeff Koons: Versailles*, Palace of Versailles, Paris 2008–2009

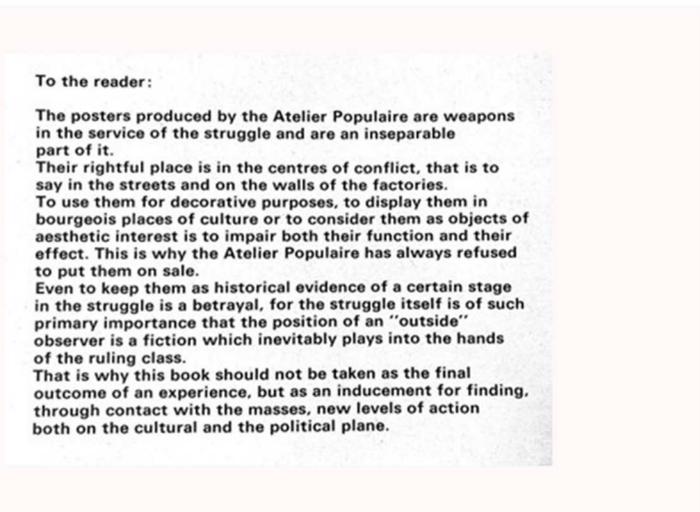
today it is a widespread practice, including the museums of ‘Islamic’ geographies, even if by the influence of ‘Western cultural heritage’, as you put it. You may also find the revolutionary publication below, the *Posters from the Revolution, Paris, May, 1968: texts and posters by Atelier Populaire*, interesting. The editor’s note ‘To the reader’ emphatically and with almost religious zeal states that these posters may never be used for a purpose – aesthetic, decorative, commercial – other than the class struggle, and to do so would be a betrayal: Yet, in time, this publication circulates, gets traded, and its visual impact continues to be experienced in new ‘gap spaces’. We may also say that works that are visually powerful and mysterious will, in time, be exhibited regardless of their original purpose and intent. Besides the Western cultural heritage, we should also consider human nature: we are curious, can’t resist mystery, and are visually driven.

Once out of its creative source environment, every artwork is situated forever in a ‘gap-space’ between the ‘origin’, as defined by the creator’s experience, and the ‘destination’, as defined by the viewer’s experience. The gap remains even when the work is returned to its original creative setting, as in the Giorgio Morandi and Constantin Brancusi studio re-creations. When faced with thoughtfully and sensitively designed exhibitions, the average viewer is well-equipped to traverse these gaps.

Returning to Barin’s work, I cannot resist taking us in another direction. In Barin’s creative vision, I also find a cultural sensibility. I always



MET Islamic Art Galleries exhibition view, 2024, middle: *Sharp Things* by Gülay Semercioglu, 2013



Texts and Posters by Atelier Populaire: Posters from the Revolution Paris May 1968, front cover and the editor's note

suspected this also to be the influence of Roman and Byzantine architecture, among others. I think this sensibility is reflected in Barni's bold, abstract lettering and designs, especially surfacing in his modern works with new freedoms of experimentation. Considering the cultural 'soul



Installation view from the exhibition *Modern Essays 4: SALON*, Salt Galata, Istanbul, Turkey, 2012, © courtesy Salt, photograph: Mustafa Hazneci

bending’ involved in a simple hello, we can’t refute that the artistic sensibility in art must also be deeply rooted in a specific geography’s historical/cultural depths. I wonder, though, if this is still true for generations coming of age in the global culture of the World Wide Web alongside their local ones.

VK I recently interviewed İpek Duben for a book I edited on her.⁵ It took place over a few months. We conducted it in English for a few reasons. One was the idea of inhabiting a language that was not our mother tongue but one that lends itself to a particular discursivity that is easier to translate into Turkish than vice versa. However, to retain its specificity, we edited and published it without the intervention of, in this case, a native English-speaking arts editor. It is a form of taking ownership of the language, and I appreciate your idea of ‘bending’ the language sitting at the heart of the exhibitionary models.

Tirdad, a close friend, calls me ‘Vasif Can’. I do not know if he knows it, but my heart melts whenever I hear it. There is no analogy for the word ‘can’ in English that locks in sincerity, being genuine, and heart-to-heart. Thank heavens, translation is not an act of translating words in a syntactical arrangement. I did, however, start thinking about how this ‘Vasif Can’ chose to have an interview with another artist from Turkey in English.

I agree with both you and Amin. A thoughtful exhibitionary apparatus at its best includes two possibilities at once: first, it is contextual and

⁵ <https://saltonline.org/en/2700/ipek-duben-the-skin-body-and-i?home>

allows us to reimagine its original potentiality. Second, it incorporates an estrangement effect, implying that the return to the original moment is a fabrication, and the presentation envelope is not the same as its inner skin. Exhibition practice operates at the skin/surface with little questioning of the envelope. When an encyclopaedic institution such as the MET's, by definition, colonialist 'Department of Islamic Art', reclaims a subject through an exhibition, we are more curious about that act of reclamation. The Feshane exhibition is problematic because the organisers were impervious to the meaning they were dealing with; they conformed the works to forms and colours that could be organised generically. The question is, as you have put it, Barin's actualisation of the exceptional, the traversal practice between 'traditional' calligraphy and republican modernity. I often ask myself the difference between an orientalist artist studio replete with 'oriental' things laid out to signify context and the MET Islamic Art Galleries. The architectural details are obviously 'fake' to anyone who has experience with geography and time. Osman Hamdi Bey had unhindered access to exceptional materials when he made these paintings of reformist orientals. He had no qualms about putting together a thirteenth-century lantern with a seventeenth-century pulpit. The question is, does a museum have the right to do so? Or shall we reimagine these as part of a syncretic context where time is not linear? I am torn between feeling like I'm walking on a stage and approximating.

Here, I would like to bring an example, an exhibition called 'Salon' in 2012 at Salt.⁶ My colleague Meriç Öner had curated it. Salon was a program about the object and its environment. We displayed real Butik-A furniture from an actual Ankara living room. I remember being very disturbed when I saw the Eames House displayed at LACMA in Los Angeles. The Eames house was perfectly reassembled. The museum had a stance parallel to the practice and skill of the Hollywood movie set, which, like the 'make-believe' status of the Eames house, was also the intersection point of many Los Angeles artists, from Ed Kienholz to Paul McCarthy.

The visitors participated in shameless voyeurism, like uninvited guests from the house's garden. We discussed the morbidity of watering the plants in the house with the museum's gardeners. Unlike the Eames house, we decided to continue the program at Salon with the idea of 'performance'. Lars Von Trier's *Dogville* was the critical reference. Keeping with Trier's idea of colliding the film with the theatrical, we looked at the distinction between 'acting in' the space in the movie and the audience acting in the exhibition space. We watch horrific things together in the darkness of a movie house, even if we are ashamed of the person next to us. At the exhibition, we decide when and how to watch it. When looking at a problematic image, we negotiate silently with others who share the same space as our bodies, unlike the two eyes in the cinema. As much as we exist as spectators, we perform and are aware of our surroundings. Therefore, we could engage in 'play' with the theatrical space that Salon created. It was possible to subject the audience to the convincing-alienating tools used by Trier, which do not hide their deception. These are not formal exhibition negotiations. Instead, they revolve around the appropriate visualisation of specific research within a given space. For this reason, we did not favor 'infographics' like those in didactic and historical exhibitions.

6 Info: <https://saltonline.org/en/277/modern-essays-4?tag=17>
 Images: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/saltresearchandprograms/albums/72157642947434083/>

I am not sure if we must expect so much from the viewer. I prefer conditioned contexts. Otherwise, we become pillagers and intruders, which is truly disgraceful.

Of course, I agree with you that ‘every artwork, once out of its creative source environment, is situated forever in a gap between the “origin” as defined by the creator’s experience, and the “destination” as defined by the viewer’s experience’. However, this argument annuls itself once you leave a particular Western institutional art historical legacy. I think that is the core of our discussion. Can we depict those beyond that legacy and those within it as part of the same habitus? For me, the answer is simple: no! That is where MET’s new show fails, where many books such as *Family of Man* or shows like ‘Magiciens de la Terre’ failed.

The younger generations have little to learn from history, but we, my dear old people, have much to learn from it.

SA You have introduced broader frameworks and, of course, also multiplied our avenues of inquiry. I will respond, hopefully managing to hold them all together. Firstly, I agree with your assessments and conclusions, from the global to the personal. However, I will respond differently to your crucially important question, ‘Can we depict those beyond that legacy and those within it as part of the same habitus?’ My short answer is ‘yes’, they can and should be parts ‘of the same habitus’, and we should continue ‘reimagining these as parts of a syncretic context’. Now, I have the considerable task of explaining how I arrive at these conclusions.

As you bring up the Universal/Encyclopaedic Museums, I am reviewing a two-part talk I will present, titled *Looted Art-1: How Napoleon Changed Museums* and *Looted Art-2: Who Gets to Keep it?*⁷ So, I’m knee-deep in the topic with all its aches and pains but also benefits. This process convinced me that once the concept/dream of the universal museum became a reality in the Louvre – almost entirely by Napoleon’s looting – the genie was out of the bottle, never to be put back in.

As well known, the Louvre as a public universal museum was superbly influential in the creative and intellectual life of Paris and of Europe; visitors from around the world were being impacted by the experience and dreaming of – and accomplishing – universal museums in their own cities; and 200 plus years after its creation you and I have been beneficiaries of its legacy as well, all within the more significant ‘Western, institutional art historical legacy’. While the ‘decolonise the museum’ campaign is heartening and will continue to get results, it is clear that a complete de-colonisation of universal museums cannot be achieved. In other words, having accepted that historical wrongs will not be completely reversed, I am thinking pragmatically.

Returning to the ‘genie’, I wonder if humanity was aware of its craving for comparative aesthetic experiences with full access to original artworks and objects from around the world before then. Were you and I aware of our craving before we hit the halls of New York museums? I, for my part, still remember my first proper day in NYC in 1980, when I literally ran through the MET, MoMA, and Whitney museums in quick succession, not to mention the private galleries along the way, in complete disbelief that all of this and more is

⁷ LIR-Learning In Retirement, Stamford, Connecticut, 11 and 18 April 2024; Collegium, WCC, Valhalla, New York, 12 April 2024

now mine to access and live with! And, no, I was not aware of my craving before. Since then, I have operated almost entirely within that paradigm, including teaching and lecturing.

My final point about the ‘genie’ is that it is a driving force in and of itself that extends to all objects of visual power regardless of original intent, purpose, and function. Of course, as you sensibly point out, the moral, ethical, and even legal questions related to the borrowing and exhibiting of these objects should be appropriately addressed, and curatorial strategies must not compromise the potential and integrity of the works in question.

A second line of inquiry that brings me to the same conclusion is the influence of dominant systems. ‘The heritage of Western institutional art history’ that you refer to has been spreading around the world and widely shaping and reshaping visual culture, and along with it, our understanding, expectations, and even what we consider to be our needs – such as the ‘craving’ I mentioned earlier. In this self-normalising continuum, if acceptance doesn’t come from ourselves and our peers, it will likely come from younger generations. Every new generation seems to start afresh from their arrival point, essentially accepting history as a given. For them, history is still terribly relevant but is a non-starter. They are not willing to carry our historical baggage. Even if they eventually arrive at our conclusions, they will have done so in their ways. Wasn’t this precisely what we have done coming of age in the 1970s–1980s to propel ourselves forward? Maybe this cycle is necessary for nothing less than the survival of hope!

As our critique and search for alternatives continue, so does our work within the dominant system. I am thinking of a recent practice in the US: an institution will acknowledge the occupied Native American land that it sits on while, of course, continuing to sit on it. Capitalism could also serve as an example, but I won’t go there for the depression it will cause us. Instead, I will offer a modest alternative practice as an artist who has to operate within capitalism. I have been apportioning my artworks in thirds: one-third to sell, one-third to gift, and one-third to destroy. This practice emerged naturally; I became aware of it recently and now continue it consciously. We can call this a compromise, but a necessary one since I need to sell to have a chance to be recognised as an artist; I want to gift for my mental/spiritual health; and I must destroy to keep quality control in my hands at the expense of commodity/income loss, just like coming to a compromise with the appalling history of universal museums.

Coming to the MET Islamic collection, you are right to remind us that it was conceived in the colonialist model at a time when Orientalism ruled the day. The MET also acknowledges this in several statements on its website. You are also right about the Orientalist look and feel of the new galleries today. By the way, in one area of the Islamic Galleries, the nineteenth century European Orientalist Paintings in the adjacent gallery are, perhaps purposefully, visible, stressing the connection. The essential colonialist/Orientalist context will not likely disappear entirely at universal museums like the MET.

You bring up the wonderfully complex example of Osman Hamdi Bey by saying that ‘he had no qualms about putting together a thirteenth-century lantern with a seventeenth-century lectern’ and asking



Yuendumu, *Yam Dreaming* (floor) and Richard Long, *Red Earth Circle* (wall), installation view from the exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre*, La Grande Halle de la Villette, Paris, 1989

if ‘a museum has the right to do so?’ By adding one more point to the above, I will also say ‘yes’ to this question by accepting your refusal from a much broader perspective. Osman Hamdi Bey was also an artist, and I connect his various strategies, such as eclecticism – perhaps his Orientalism – that you mentioned to an aesthetic/creative quest. Regardless of judgments on the quality of his art and his possible Orientalism, he has the instincts of an artist. Risking repetition, I will say that I find the aesthetic/visual instinct to be a powerful driving force of culture at the levels of artist, viewer, and institution, and a mixed blessing. Put differently, in time, artworks and objects that are visually mysterious and powerful tend to become open to public exhibitions.

Your example of the 1989 exhibition ‘Magiciens de la Terre’ is also excellent. I agree with your assessments. As an artist, however, I was overwhelmed with excitement, stimulation, and a sense of aesthetic perfection when I experienced the famous pairing in the above image from the exhibition.

I came across a similar example in 2013 at the MET’s Japanese Art Galleries. Exhibited alongside traditional Japanese painted scrolls picturing the sacred deer and globe was a contemporary work titled *PixCell-Deer#24* by Kohei Nawa. It featured a taxidermied deer covered with clear crystal globes of various sizes. I found the experience exciting and provoking, both visually and curatorially.

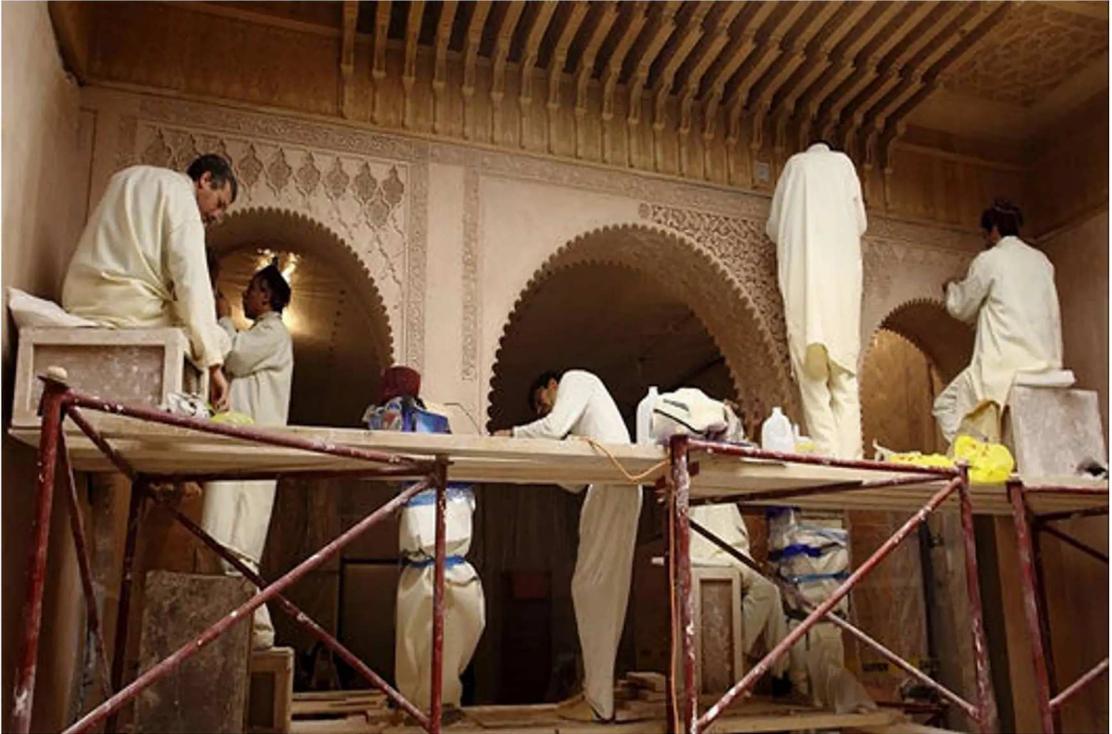
VK ‘Can we depict those beyond that legacy and those within it as part of the same habitus?’ I would not give that kind of license to museums because it will only lead to more entertainment and leisure economies, and worse, it does not throw into question the habitus itself. They will become even more lazy. You can still accomplish it with intelligence and precision, as demonstrated in the stunning image you shared. It combines ‘Yam Dreaming’ by Yuendumu, a community of Aboriginal artists in central Australia, and ‘Red Earth Circle’ by British artist Richard Long. When I saw it, it took my breath away. The contrast between horizontal-ity and verticality was evident as these two surfaces mirrored each other. One could write a book about it.

See, we’re going back to the display question once more. We make exhibitions to tell stories with an agency that holds a story together. Regarding display, I remember the Turkish term for exhibitions, (*Sergi*), that the artist Cengiz Çekil had also referred to as goods displayed on the ground; it could be a watermelon exhibition or an art exhibition, but it does not matter. Çekil would frame his works on the floor with a large, simple, canvas-like cloth. He shared with the viewer a modicum of modesty and respect. But, I worry about collapsing things together, as in MET’s show, where juxtapositions of objects reduce the complexity of each other, reinforcing most banal stereotypes.

It’s funny that we arrive at different angles from our wide-eyed museum experiences when we were young. Your three museum experiences in New York are burned into your memory. In the summer of 1977, I had the Beaubourg experience. The Louvre was a total downer, but the Stedelijk had left a distinct mark. I realise now that, as much as its architecture, it was the core educational prowess of Beaubourg that inspired me, as well as its library and the academic frame of the ‘Paris-New York’ exhibition. I always felt differently about the New York institutions you mentioned; the MET served as a repository, while MoMA and the Whitney were excellent but not as engaging as exhibition machines. Education is an add-on in those museums, part of their discipline-dividing, atomised structure. On the other hand, Beaubourg was telling stories; the exhibition structure was there to tell a story.

I prefer university museums: Grey in New York, Hammer in LA, Block in Chicago, etc. You know where I am going. Museums tell stories, provide questions and tools to deal with the world, and look awry. That is all part of their educational mission. Otherwise, we are only feeding the pleasure machine, investing in a particular museum history that follows trade fairs (we skip the capitalism issue).

SA Prompted by your encouragement, I will articulate some possibilities I imagine. I have long ignored or taken for granted the absence of the issues we discussed in the permanent collection exhibitions of institutions like the MET. After all, an ‘estrangement effect’ in the middle of an effort to create a sense of American history through art and architecture that looks and feels as if it were indigenous to the US would completely undermine that illusion. The MET attempts to seamlessly integrate authentic artworks with architectural elements that are often period replicas – as in the ancient Greek, Roman, and Islamic galleries, and the permanent collection exhibitions tend to be chronological/categorical rather than context/story-oriented.



The Moroccan Court, construction view, MET Islamic Art Galleries, 2011

A striking example is the Moroccan Court of the MET Islamic Art Galleries built by Moroccan artisans in 2010–2011. It is an exquisite piece, and I also appreciate its relevance to contemporary Moroccan artisans. What is problematic is the seamless integration of this piece and other architectural elements, such as the marble floors, mosaics, arches, and columns, with the authentic artworks and objects on display. The intention may be to evoke permanence, belonging, completeness, and perfection, but these cultural illusions hide historical truths.

Alternatively, I imagine introducing elements such as doubt-inducing spatial voids, unfinishedness, incompleteness, and even unsettledness. In such a space, even faux architecture may coexist with authentic artworks without ‘fooling’ the viewer. The three exhibitions below may bring some concreteness to these imaginings.

First, let me share an unexpected discovery from a Chelsea visit last spring. I had the opportunity to experience two exhibitions that, by chance, engagingly complemented each other.

‘Red, Yellow, and Blue: The Last Paintings’ at Pace Gallery displayed the paintings of Chuck Close left unfinished upon his death. The exhibition design didn’t need much more than leaving wide open spaces between the groups of works, and the usual huge white cube left no doubt about the abstract, transitional, estranged nature of the viewing experience. Not to mention that these works were probably made with spaces like this in mind.



Installation view from the exhibition *Red, Yellow and Blue: The Last Paintings*, Pace Gallery, 2024, photograph: Serdar Arat

‘A Dark Hymn-Highlights from the Collection’ at the Hill Art Foundation was another successful example of effectively introducing ‘estrangement’ to the exhibition design. The stark pairings of artworks, odd spacing/distancing, dramatic shift of spatial proportions, subtly changing wall colour and texts, furniture to sit on, and large windows letting in the street life all contributed to a sense of abstraction. This design reflected how we, the audience, experience all of the art in our minds, comparatively, but with endless possible connections and readings that are never finalised.

Both exhibitions gave me a palpable sense of the gap-space we frequently refer to in our conversation. Here, then, is another attempt at a summary/definition for our purposes: Exhibition as consciousness reflected in physical space; in between abstractness of mind – instinct, feeling, and thought – and concreteness of physical space; between origin and destination; in process, transitional, incomplete; a parallel consciousness given physical form; a collective imagining; a gap-space. Ironically, the MET finished, polished, and wax-sealed even its ‘Unfinished: Thoughts Left Visible’ exhibition at the MET-Brauer in 2016. As an artist, I devoured it for my own purposes. However, I also felt the missed opportunity at an exhibition highlighting the value of the unfinished.



Installation view from the exhibition 'A Dark Hymn: Highlights from the Hill Collection', Hill Art Foundation, New York, 2024, photograph: Serdar Arat

Finally, I'm thinking of the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, which has been struggling with its notorious colonial history and founding mission, looted collections, and disparaging displays. The redesigned spaces and exhibitions combine some of the most harrowing symbols of colonial cruelty with contemporary responses to them, as in the accompanying image of the *Pirogue of King Leopold-III*.

When entering and exiting the museum, visitors are confronted with King Leopold's Royal Pirogue and an accompanying large wall text in several languages, which reads, 'Everything passes, except the past'. This text references a more extensive project by the Goethe Institute in Brussels, which explores colonial heritage in Belgium, France, Italy, Portugal, and Spain, as the museum states.

Returning to the MET and MoMA exhibitions, I wonder about my strong visceral response, which was vastly unsettling for reasons I don't fully understand – and only somewhat settled by this conversation.

Even a cursory glance at these two exhibition images reflects completely different universes of thought and practice, which can only partially be explained by their missions and histories. Encouragingly, they are moving in the same direction by mixing up their 'chronological/categorical' exhibitions. The MET has recently re-installed its European Paintings Galleries, cautiously introducing Modern and contemporary works and mixing and matching cultures, geographies, and historical periods, all to create comparative visual experiences and 'to tell new stories', as stated by the MET.



Pirogue of King Leopold-III, Belgian Congo – Nigeria, wood carving, 1957, 100 people, 67 ft, 3.5 tons, sapo tree, Tervuren Museum, Belgium

On closer reading, this early work by Akyavaş at MoMA, for instance, comes across as a delicate but true exploration of form, surface flatness, and perceived depth, the memory of the Ottoman calligraphic aesthetic and curvilinear, perhaps cubist-influenced fragmentation, all painted ‘soberly’ in Akyavaş’s own words at the time.⁸ It also expresses a sensibility that I find in historical ‘Islamic’/Ottoman paintings and applied arts alike that is not evoked by easily recognisable cultural symbols but lies in the depths of one’s consciousness, the essence of calligraphic gesture internalised.

This, much later painting by Akyavaş at the MET, on the other hand, relies on applied ornamentation and applied calligraphy, prefers surface design and beauty to deeper formal exploration, borrows easily recognisable ‘Islamic’/Ottoman cultural elements, and arrives at a contented, nostalgic dream. This is the opposite of ‘sober’ painting in Akyavaş’s earlier statement. By exhibiting this particular work of Akyavaş in the context of decorative/applied arts, the MET further accentuates the painting’s decorative/design quality/aesthetic. It helps reinforce the overarching Western bias about ‘Islamic’ art.

My extreme sensitivity to this issue may come from my strong resistance to this bias since the 1970s and may not be relevant or meaningful today. I best return to the broader perspective you have introduced and ask: Do you think Pompidou Center’s attraction for you was also rooted in this sense of incompleteness, ongoing process, and constant change reflected in its architecture as well as its mission and programming? It certainly was for me, even though I’ve been far from experiencing it regularly in person. I remember the Francis Bacon exhibition in 2019 being somewhat distracting, perhaps due to the aging architecture, lighting, and crowd control issues.

⁸ MoMA, https://www.moma.org/collection/works/78928?artist_id=1753&page=1&sov_referrer=artist

Vasif Kortun Unfortunately, The Pompidou has seen different restorations over the years, the most ominous being Gae Aulenti’s intervention when it eventually became a ‘museum’. In 1977, it was revolutionary with



MET Islamic Art Galleries, *Dialogues: Modern Artists and the Ottoman Past*, exhibition view, 2024

Pontus Hulten at the helm, one of West Europe's last brilliant male curators who was revolutionary at the Moderna Museet and followed the footsteps of William Sandberg at the Stedelijk. Jean Hubert Martin succeeded Hulten with equal brilliance. It is funny that we did not even spend a second on the fundamental issue, glaringly obvious. What are all these artists doing in the Islamic department? I was recently at a symposium, 'Islamic Art History and the Global Turn: Theory, Method, Practice', in Qatar, where several colleagues chose to use the term 'Islamicate' rather than Islamic. While a contested term, it was coined by Marshall Hodgson to underscore the distinction between religion and the society and culture associated historically with religion. For Hodgson, the term 'Islamic' was reserved for Islam, like theology or the study of the Shari'a, while all else – philosophy, culture, languages, etc. should be for 'Islamicate'. Of course, this does not make the problems of departmentalisation less acute. You may ask why these artists are not in the Modern and Contemporary Art department. Or, why are they not in the American Wing, as both Akyavaş and Doğançay were naturalised, US citizens? It is just that this sort of categorisation is not tenable. If I ran an encyclopaedic museum, I would first dissolve all departments and pull the carpet under the staff. You can keep the knowledge sets but not the borders. Constructing exhibitions on visual relations and simi-



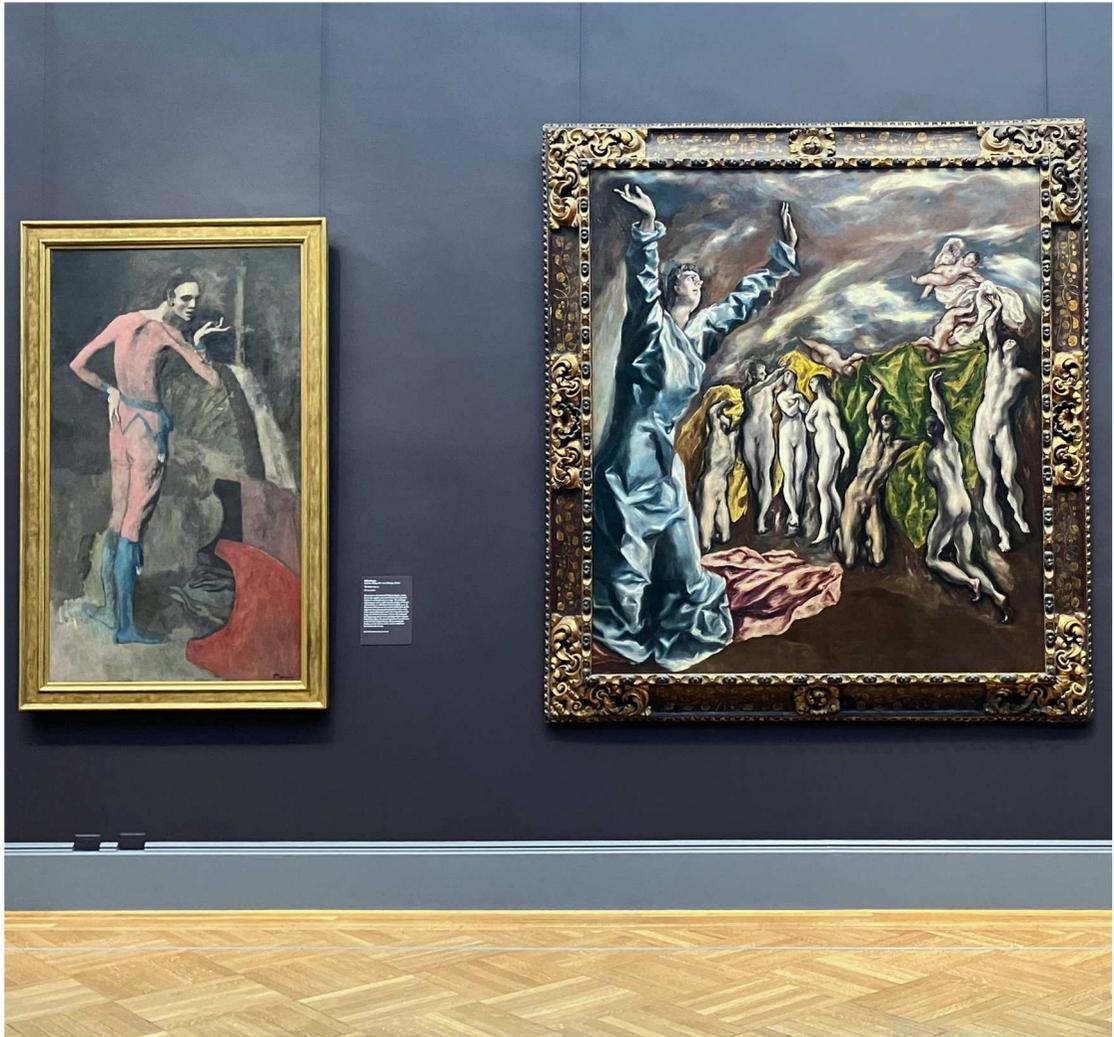
Installation view from the exhibition ‘Calligraphic Abstraction’, MoMA, 2023–2024, photograph: Serdar Arat

litude is another area in which I lack confidence. The wonderful Robert Rosenblum was one of my graduate school professors. May he rest in peace. He had this incredible knack for juxtaposing images, so they started speaking to each other. Although it was a fantastic exercise, the lack of a meaningful thought process undermined it. Sometimes, I agree with that, but a more severe side insists that art transcends mere visuality.

SA Mere visual relationships between artworks will undoubtedly end up as short-lived provocations. As we have suggested previously, a sensible balance is also needed here.

Even though museums are beginning to loosen categorical borders cautiously, it looks like categorical rigidity will be with us for a long time. Of the many reasons, two are essential to mention. First, as you know, Art History education and training is highly categorical, and the loosening there is very slow, ultimately reflecting in art institutions as well. Next, categories should be understood as shortcuts to communication in the temporary, immediate, and short term, not as permanently meaningful concepts. If only we could discard them as soon as we use them.

I’ll share a related personal anecdote here. At the opening of my exhibition at Gallery 1756 in Chicago in 1995, a visitor, himself a Turkish-American, approached me directly with these comments: ‘You’re Turkish...



Left Pablo Picasso, *The Actor*, 1904–1905, MET Modern and Contemporary Art Collection; right: El Greco, *The Vision of Saint John*, circa 1608–1614, MET European Paintings Collection

but your work is so Western. It's painting, oil on canvas, abstract... I don't see calligraphy, or minarets, or Islamic patterns... I lived in Turkiye; I know the culture... what makes your work Turkish?' He just walked away after saying his bit, and I have tried to dismiss it all as ignorance of cultural identity and art in general. My attempt to ignore may have worked if I hadn't encountered the same ignorance that continued to crop up in other contexts over the years and is very much alive and well today.

Another recent parallel was at 'The Harlem Renaissance and Transatlantic Modernism' exhibition at the MET. The Harlem Renaissance was about defining 'blackness' – black representation and sensibility – by black artists and intellectuals to reclaim black identity from white prejudice and stereotypes. Still, we can say that even today, black artists are, at least in part, responding to and/or acknowledging the white perceptions, definitions, and expectations of the dominant culture.



Erol Akyavaş, *Glory of the Kings*, 1959, oil on canvas, 48" x 7' 1/4" (121.8 x 214 cm), gift of Mr and Mrs L M Angeleski, object number 130.1961, MoMA

I believe that the dominant culture in which one comes of age shapes one's consciousness and works, in fundamental ways that are not easily recognisable on the surface. Exploring those depths through the creative process to 'discover' underlying sensibilities is one thing; intellectually 'assigning' cultural identity is another. The first may lead to truths, the latter to biases. This may also be my 1970s generational consciousness speaking. You and I are of generations long before the global equaliser internet when individuals were first shaped profoundly by their local geographies and cultures and then were exposed to various world cultures, if at all. Today, these two seem to be happening simultaneously within the global culture, and I can no longer gauge the profoundness of local cultural influence. These thoughts have two outcomes for me as an artist: First, my work is deeply shaped by coming of age in the 1970s Türkiye. Second, I suspect that coming of age in a continuously and globally connected world has altered that equation, but I don't know how. On the surface, I guess that 'deep, long exploration' is replaced with 'immediate identification/labeling', but I'm far from certain.

VK At the risk of sounding promotional, I have attached a few links here that best articulate my position on what kind of institutions may be possible solutions to the problem.⁹ Like you, I can only respond contextually, and these three texts and one interview are about place, time, and conditions. I often feel lonely in my path because I think about structures, not simply programs. There is a longer story here about a cultural sensibility dictated by either the 'outside' or the 'inside'. Our struggles to find anchors are mainly a consequence of the history of the Turkish state and our place in it as agents and products. The banality of your experience in 1995 is one repeated ad nauseum over the last 150-plus years with various degrees of intensity and

⁹ Questions on Institutions; Threshold; LIKE A FEVER | On Public Mindedness: In Conversation with Vasif Kortun | Asia Art Archive; Post-Curatorial: Testing Site - springerin | Hefte für Gegenwartskunst



Erol Akyavas, *Ferman*, 1992, installation view from the exhibition 'Dialogues: Modern Artists and the Ottoman Past', MET, 2023–2024, photograph: Serdar Arat

intelligence. It does not hold any water and is way too generalised. I grew up at the modernist housing settlement of Ataköy in section 2, building K35, apartment 81, in the late 60s and early 70s. My parents were erudite and staunch secularists. I attended a British junior high school, followed by an American High School. We are who we are; I exist as a specific cultural construct. However, one has to unfold, be conscious of it, and develop tools to put oneself in the places of others, look at life from different angles, understand differences, and seek a common point to speak from. A cultural institution must understand who it serves, talks to, and the tools needed for engagement. My upbringing included going to the Turkish Sinematek with my parents and my father being in the press distribution business, which meant a book or two each day and a community of novelists and poets I grew up around. In that sense, I wasn't built to be ordinary, and I had to deal with the burden of that. We all carry the weight of Turkey, which is very different from the burdens of colonised peoples. Our past is an open wound. And I very much doubt that new generations are immune from it.

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