

Departing from Oneself

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Cases of Pre-rational Mimesis before a Spatial Artwork

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Walter Benjamin, who found an anthropological significance in the 'mimetic faculty' (1978), also observed an experience of magical enchantment in one's confrontation with artworks, which he expressed by the term 'aura'. He defined aura as a 'strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close the object may be' (1979: 250). Elsewhere, he stated that 'to perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return' (1969a: 188). Michael Taussig (1993), following Benjamin, mentions the occurrence of a 'mimetic vertigo' when one feels oneself mirrored in the eyes of the other. He says that the convention developed by western man against the threat of losing one's identity is the 'defensive appropriation of the unfamiliar by means of an "explanation"' (237). Below, perhaps in order to defend my own identity as an art viewer, I attempt to give an account of the uncanny encounter of the audience with a controversial work by Selim Birsal, a Turkish artist. The work, an installation, was produced, partly in situ, by Birsal in an international group exhibition in 1995, on the first waiting platform of Ankara Train Station, just behind the main entrance hall. To put it simply, this paper mainly concerns itself with possible implications of the 'accidental travels' of various people in relation to a work sited in a place originally constructed to *regulate* travel.

Birsal's work consisted of twelve hollow-relief human figures (six male, four female, and two children whose sexes were unidentifiable) made of wrapping paper, painted with graphite, and

laid on the floor side by side. The figures of women and children were made beforehand. A theatre actor, Şehsuvar Aktaş, served as a model for the male figures, which were produced on site. The actor lay on the floor in a variety of poses while the artist wrapped his body with wet wrapping paper. Birsal then dried the moulded pieces with an electric resistant heater, while Aktaş was still wrapped in them. After they dried, the actor got out of the pieces, and they were placed on the floor. Those wrinkled, hollow graphite coloured figures remained there, on the platform, among people waiting for trains. The work was entitled *Kurşun Uykusunu* [Lead Sleep], a Turkish idiom.¹

Unfortunately, the work could be exhibited for only 2 days, since unknown people damaged it, together with some other works in the same exhibition, and the management of the train station decided to close the exhibition. The officially declared reason for the closure was that it became impossible to protect works against damage. However, what witnesses spoke of was different. Huge numbers of soldiers were frequently transported in parties from Ankara Train Station to southeast Anatolia, in order to engage in warfare against the Kurdish rebels at that time. Some people, namely those who were relatives and friends of soldiers dispatched from the station, compared the hollow figures made by Birsal to dead bodies, and damaged them as a reaction. They also complained to the management that the figures had a harmful effect on the psychology of both the soldiers and those who saw them off. It was said

that the management acknowledged the complainants to be right, and closed the exhibition.

I would like to argue that people with divergent cultural ‘habitus’² who engaged in a pre-rational and excessive mimesis based on bodily affection, could not help being adrift and played, in partly actual and partly imaginary terms, in the space-time, or the ‘chronotope’³ of that work. This kind of mimesis and play, although it does not last long, can be considered as a ‘cruel’ play, in the sense put forward by Antonin Artaud, and it can be posed against the naturalistic drama of the ‘outer world’.



• Selim Birsel, *Kurşun Uykusu* (Lead Sleep), Ankara, 1995. Installation view. Photo by the artist, Selim Birsel

However, such cruel play is bound to end in a mimesis-representation of the work so as to protect the consistency of the previously established subject positions of the audience. Yet, the final reactions of different groups of people would diverge from each other according to habitual differences.

Through the placing of those hollow figures on the floor, that specific part of the train station (which itself constituted a proper stage for several naturalistic dramas, as a place of departure or a transitional space between different places) was transformed into a theatrical stage, or ‘a world apart’, that allowed performances by different groups of audiences. The audience for the work

consisted of three main groups: (1) art-lovers, who came there to see the work, (2) homeless people, mostly youths and children, who lived in the station, and (3) ‘normal’ users of the station who waited for trains or came to see off their relatives and friends. As a member of the first group, but also as an observer of the other two, I saw a certain divergence in the experience of those groups, on which I try to elaborate later in this paper.

First of all, I would like to give an account of various aspects of what I have called pre-rational and excessive mimesis. Walter Benjamin (1969b)



• *Kurşun Uykusu*. Work in progress. Selim Birsel, the artist, and Şehsuvar Aktas, who serves as a model, prepare to produce a new figure. Photo by the artist

has asserted that, instead of presenting an appearance or a structure, a Dadaist artwork ‘became an instrument of ballistics. It hit the spectator like a bullet, it happened to him, thus acquiring a tactile quality’ (238).

Starting from this tactility, Benjamin proposes that a work can be experienced either in distraction or in concentration. In Benjamin’s view, architecture represents ‘the prototype of a work of art the reception of which is consummated by a collectivity in a state of distraction’. He describes the experience of buildings as follows:

Buildings are appropriated in a twofold manner: by use and by perception – or rather, by touch and sight. . . . On

the tactile side there is no counterpart to contemplation on the optical side. Tactile appropriation is accomplished not so much by attention as by habit. As regards architecture, habit determines to a large extent even optical reception. . . . This mode of appropriation, developed with reference to architecture, in certain circumstances acquires canonical value. For the tasks which face the human apparatus of perception at the turning points of history cannot be solved by optical means, that is by contemplation alone. They are mastered gradually by habit, under the guidance of tactile appropriation. (1969b: 240)

same individual ‘enters the culturally constructed world . . . leaving a remainder, a biological substrate that can provide the basis for resistance’ (1993: 125, n. 16). Starting from this ground, she develops a concept of ‘synaesthetic system’, through which the inner images of memory are connected to the external stimuli received from one’s specific environment. She describes this system as follows:

The circuit from sense-perception to motor response begins and ends in the world. The brain is thus not an



• *Kuşun Uykusu*. Work in progress. Selim Birsel dries the wet wrapping paper moulded around the body of the actor. Photo by the artist



• *Kuşun Uykusu*. Installation view from the entrance to the station. Photo by the artist, Selim Birsel

Susan Buck-Morss (1993), in her reconsideration of the above-referred article by Benjamin, turns back to the etymology of the term ‘aesthetics’ in order to re-evaluate the significance of Benjamin’s argument. She recalls that ‘*aisthitikos* is the ancient Greek word for that which is “perceptive by feeling”,’ and ‘*aisthisis* is the sensory experience of perception’. Accordingly, she posits that ‘the original field of aesthetics is not art but reality – corporeal, material nature. . . . It is a form of cognition, achieved through taste, touch, hearing, seeing, smell – the whole corporeal sensorium’ (125).

A significant point in Buck-Morss’s argument is her view that although the individual always exists as a culturally constructed ‘second nature’, the

isolable anatomical body, but part of a system that passes through the person and her or his (culturally specific, historically transient) environment. As the source of stimuli and the arena for motor response, the external world must be included to complete the sensory circuit. . . . The field of the sensory circuit thus corresponds to that of ‘experience’, in the classical philosophical sense of a mediation of subject and object, and yet its very composition makes the so-called split between subject and object (which was the constant plague of classical philosophy) simply irrelevant. (1993: 128–9)

According to Buck-Morss, there are three aspects of the synaesthetic system: physical sensation, motor reaction, and psychical meaning.

These three aspects converge in 'signs and gestures comprising a mimetic language'. This language cannot be conceived in conceptual terms; '[w]ritten on the body's surface as a convergence between the impresses of the external world and the express of subjective feeling, the language of this system threatens to betray the language of reason, undermining its philosophical sovereignty' (1993: 129).

Such a conception of aesthetic experience makes it possible to conceive of the processes in which the body, although always largely conditioned by the cultural milieu, can be affected by what it is exposed to in terms of a pre-rational mimetic relationship. Buck-Morss relates that Benjamin understands modern experience in terms of shock. The shock is caused by the 'excessive energies' issued by the external stimuli. In reference to Sir Charles Bell's (who was also a medical doctor) excessive impressions of the dead bodies on the battlefield of Waterloo, Buck-Morss asserts that

Bell's 'excess' of sentiment did not mean emotionalism. . . . It was not a psychological category of sympathy or compassion, of understanding the other's point of view from the perspective of intentional meaning, but, rather, physiological – a sensory mimesis, a response of the nervous system to external stimuli which was 'excessive' because what he apprehended was *unintentional*, in the sense that it resisted intellectual comprehension. It could not be given meaning. The category of rationality could be applied to these physiological perceptions only in the sense of rationalization. (1993: 130)

Michael Taussig (1993), again referring to Benjamin, makes a comprehensive study of the concept of mimesis, and develops it up to a point that may be quite useful for the purposes of this article. Taussig explains his concern as 'to reinstate in and against the myth of Enlightenment, with its universal, context-free reason, not merely the resistance of the concrete particular to abstraction', but also 'its sensuousness, its mimeticity' (1993: 2). He interprets Benjamin's notion of 'mimetic faculty', that is what remains from a compulsion to 'become and behave like something else', as 'the capacity to Other' (19). Taussig observes that there

are two layers of mimesis: 'a copying or imitation, and a palpable, sensuous, connection between the very body of the perceiver and the perceived'. He thinks that 'to ponder mimesis is to become sooner or later caught . . . in sticky webs of copy *and* contact, image *and* bodily involvement of the perceiver in the image' (21). Following Benjamin, Taussig re-emphasizes the relation between the tactile aspect of perception and habit, in which, as he asserts, 'unconscious strata of culture are built into social routines as bodily disposition' (25).

On the other hand, we have seen that, for Benjamin, the tactile aspect of perception was also closely related with the appreciation of space. Taussig discusses this point in reference to Roger Callois' well-known article on what he called 'legendary psychasthenia' (1984). In this article, Callois examines examples of excessive mimicry in animals and associates this phenomenon with human mimetic capacity, which he considers as a threat to individual identity. He suggests that mimesis, before imitating, can be considered as a temptation by space. This temptation leads to a theatrical experience in which one's sense of self is shattered. As Taussig puts it, 'Callois tries to describe this drama in its most extreme form where the mimicking self, tempted by space, spaces out' (Taussig 1993: 34). Callois describes the experience of space by schizophrenic patients as follows:

'I know where I am, but I do not feel as though I'm at the spot where I find myself.' To these dispossessed souls, space seems to be a devouring force. Space pursues them, encircles them, digests them in a gigantic phagocytosis. It ends by replacing them. Then the body separates itself from thought, the individual breaks the boundary of his skin and occupies the other side of his senses. He tries to look at himself from any point whatever in space. He feels himself becoming space, *dark space where things cannot be put*. . . . He is similar, not similar to something, but just *similar*. And he invents spaces of which he is 'the convulsive possession'. (Callois 1984: 30; cited in Taussig 1993: 34)⁴

Callois thinks that the experience is not unique to schizophrenia. He posits that the tactile aspect of

mimesis is always a threat for 'normal' people, too (1984: 30). The extreme example of schizophrenia given by Callois helps Taussig to understand the most significant aspect of the mimetic faculty, 'this "degree zero" of similitude, an ineffable plasticity in the face of the world's forms and forms of life'. Taussig explains the theatrical interaction between form and space as a process that gives way to the concept of 'presence':

I am struck with the way, therefore, mimesis is not only a matter of one being another being, but with this tense yet fluid theatrical relation of form and space with which Callois would tempt us. I am especially struck by the notion of 'presence' as an invented space of which the mime is the convulsive possession. And as such, presence is intimately tied to this curious phenomenon of 'spacing out' – this plasticity and theatricality. (1993: 34)

As can be deduced from the description at the beginning of this article, *Kurşun Uykusu*, because of the special emphasis made on its spatial and tactile characteristics, provided potential for an uncanny experience for the audience. While constituting its own space, that is, setting its own stage within the naturalized setting of such an established institution as a train station, it also deliberately allowed passages between 'in' and 'out'. The porous nature of the border, or the 'net', created an uncanny effect.

Indeed, the border between the 'natural' space and the space of the work as its other was in its most permeable form. What provided the border of that 'other' space was mainly the hollowness, or the fakeness of the figures themselves. It showed that although human figures were referred to, the tactile or material qualities of the work were more emphasized. In other words, the likeness to models seemed to be utilized in order to emphasize the deviation from them. If it is also considered that the work was partly produced in situ, in front of the audience, the emphasis on difference rather than semblance becomes more apparent. Consequently, the fact that one could not help taking those figures as human bodies, and could not prevent oneself from being affected by their 'gaze', although they were explicitly shown not to be

human bodies, rendered that part of the waiting platform an uncanny space, mainly because such affection seemed unreasonable.

What provided a basis for a pre-rational and excessive mimesis in such an uncanny situation were the tactile, textural characteristics of the figures and also of their immediate environment. Taken in this sense, the encounter with Birsel's hollow figures can be compared to Buck-Morss's account of Sir Charles Bell's experience of dead bodies on the battlefield. What was involved was not a case of identification or empathy but rather a mimicry of the actual characteristics of those 'bodies'; that is, a reconstitution of their attributes as belonging to *this* body (of mine) which was *captured* by them: the skin deformed, wrinkled and darkened (burned?), the touch of the cold, hard stone pavement of the floor on the oversensitive and fragile body, the experience of deep sleep (or coma or death?), etc. The body was doubled then: one part sensing, the other enacting the sense and elaborating the scene; between them, the imaginary oscillated. The possibility of playing so violently and of enduring sensation due to the doubling enabled the imaginary to get into contact with the past memories of the decentred self, to associate the sensation with imaginable situations, and to transform the cruel play into a drama. At this stage of the experience, the environment acquired a specific value.

Birsel's work was inevitably experienced together with its surroundings. The extraordinary looseness of the borders of the work allowed all the spatial elements of the station to interact with the work. The architecture of the station, the paving of the floor, the nearby advertisements, some of which had been there for years, the dark and dusty look of the railway, together created a local atmosphere for the theatrical experience. Those figures lying on the platform, among people waiting for trains, just constituted a group, and they acted together with others in the station in one's imaginary enactment of the scene.

The theatrical significance of the encounter with Birsel's figures can better be understood if the

temporal implications of the spatial attributes of the work are taken into consideration. The contrast between the architecture and decoration of the building, that date from relatively early years of the Turkish Republic, and the later modifications to the decoration with the addition of contemporary advertisements, the appearance of old and few relatively new trains, together with the divergent clothing styles and behaviour of passengers, all these presented a vivid image of the age in a rich historical setting. This scenery, which was perhaps no longer discernible to people who were so accustomed to it, and so involved in their own daily routine, started to perform again because of that extraordinary occurrence on the platform. A narrower sense of time was also effective on the performance of the work, which was related to the normal function of the platform. For those who came there to wait for trains, the duration of the performance was to be limited by the duration of waiting; otherwise they would miss their trains. An uncontrolled concentration on the work would distract them from the rhythm required by a daily timetable. But for those who, as I did, came to receive the artwork, the reverse was the case. Since they came to concentrate on the work, they needed a rhythm and a sense of time that would allow absorption; and the fuss of the others, and the quick change of the surrounding appearances would disrupt their concentration. In sum, it is possible to assume the existence of an ambiguity in the experience of space-time for any receiver, which should be expected to cause some complications. I think this openness of the work to interacting with its surroundings also enabled an audience with various backgrounds to bring their own 'habitus' to their performance on the stage of the work.

While I was watchfully seeing with a group of people how those figures were being formed by Birsal around the body of the actor who cooperated with him in production, I heard the voice of an old man standing beside me: 'Yes, sons; this is the situation of retired workers like me!' What was that situation? Evidently, the old man got a certain sense of misery from the work, which he associated with

his own life conditions. What needs to be emphasized here is not that he made such an association but that he saw those fake figures as better examples of his own situation. He found an opportunity for agitation in the pre-rational mimetic relationship between the figures and the audience, who could not have normally recognized his situation just because they were accustomed to see such people in their daily routine. On the other hand, when he invited people to share his own representation of the work, his aim was not to make others pity his situation but rather to rationalize and naturalize the excessive effect of the work. In other words, it could be said that he helped others to keep their subject positions in relation to the work, and, in turn, demanded from them an appreciation of his real situation, thus enabling him to endure.

It was much more difficult for homeless youths and children, who were permanent users of the station, to endure the conditions in which they live. Actually, both during the process of installation of Birsal's work and while examining those figures lying on the platform, I always thought of those young people who had to sleep in the station in a similar situation. I found a parallel between the unbearable look of the figures and the hopeless situation of those people. Another and perhaps a stronger similarity could be observed in the terrifying muteness of both the paper figures and those subaltern youth.

Indeed, there was a clear difference between the attitudes of the retired worker and the homeless youth towards the work. While the old man tried to *speak* on behalf of the figures and thus invite other people to make an analogy, young people said nothing at all, although they all gathered around the work with great interest. Instead, surprisingly, they started to play with the figures. Several of them lifted the paper figures and looked at the back of them as if to make sure that there were no people inside. However, most of them were already watching when Birsal moulded some of those figures around the body of the actor, which means they knew that the inside was empty. The reasoning

behind that strange gesture might have been to display the figures rather than looking at them, thus re-emphasizing their effect on people. Even more striking was when some children attempted to lie under the hollow figures and cover their bodies with them. How should one read that strange act? Was it an attempt to participate in the shocking effect of the figures on people who pretended not to recognize the children's existence, though they met in that station everyday? Or was it a theatrical 'gestus' that represented what those children lacked most: a secure shelter and a warm cuddle, even if by a fake body? Perhaps both applied. But perhaps they were 'just playing', and those interpretations were symptomatic of my own wish to save myself from the unbearable effect of that 'cruel play', simply by playing the role of a poor witness. One could never be sure unless they spoke with their own voice. Unfortunately, they did not; leaving all the people watching them with their own readings of the scene, which would continue ad infinitum, but which they could not represent decisively.

After observing several alternative ways of experiencing Birsal's work in addition to my own, I can imagine how those people who saw off their young relatives to military service might have been affected by the figures lying on the platform. I can also imagine how some of them were compelled to actual violence under a strong desire to 'abject' those 'obscene bodies'. Can one claim so easily that the response of those people who damaged the work was not an 'aesthetic' one, in the actual sense of the term? I argue that it was an aesthetic and a theatrical response as well as being a real act of violence. The event was one of those occasions that collapsed the hygienic separation of art and reality based on a transcendental conception of aesthetics.

A facile or superficial interpretation of the event might be to assume that those people who damaged the work were not able to distinguish between the aesthetic and the real. Actually, this assumption is based on another one, namely, that one's imagination always works intentionally. However, as I have tried to elaborate above, the pre-rational mode of mimesis may also function against the rational rep-

resentative order and it is even able to challenge one's established subject position, which can also be regarded as identification. This point is related to the difficulty of realizing that one's presence in actuality is also theatrical.

It is worth considering that for those people who were seeing off their relatives and friends to military service, it was a heroic scene. For them, the waiting platform and all the surrounding objects constituted the stage. Yet, there was one more requirement to complete the drama: the scene should have been naturalized so as to enable them to believe that their relatives and friends were *real* heroes. It was exactly this requirement that led those people to violence. Being affected by the work, their imagination inevitably tried to make it part of their own drama. However, once naturalized like the other elements, the interference of the work shattered the essential requirement of the drama: its heroic character. Since they could no longer help taking the work seriously, and since they could not allow the work to carry them to 'another world', the only possible way to purify the scene was to sacrifice those unbearable 'bodies'. Five years after the actual experience of that work, and in the light of the studies I made to interpret the memories of it, I now conclude that a 'dark play',⁵ going on outside and enframing Birsal's work, has contaminated the artistic space-time of the work as a consequence of being effectively influenced by it.

NOTES

1 'Kurşun uykusu', literally 'lead sleep', means very deep sleep, in reference to the heaviness of lead as a metal. On the other hand, 'kurşun' also means bullet, thus the idiom refers to death as well, using the switch between the two meanings of the word.

2 The term 'habitus' was used by Pierre Bourdieu to understand some forms of behaviour in the cultural field in general (1977, 1990) but also in the literary and artistic field in particular (1984, 1993). According to his definition, habitus is 'a durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations' which 'produces practices which in turn tend to reproduce the objective conditions which produced the generative principle of habitus in the first place'. Bourdieu posits that 'because the habitus is an endless capacity to engender products – thoughts, perceptions, expressions, actions – whose limits are set

by the historically and socially situated conditions of its production, the conditioning and conditional freedom it secures is as remote from a creation of unpredictable novelty as it is from a simple mechanical reproduction of the initial conditionings' (1977: 95).

3 Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) describes chronotope as follows: 'We will give the name *chronotope* (literally 'time space') to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature. . . . [W]e are borrowing it for literary criticism almost as a metaphor (almost, but not entirely). . . . The chronotope as a formally constitutive category determines to a significant degree the image of man in literature as well. The image of man is always intrinsically chronotopic.' Here Bakhtin refers to Kant's definition of space and time 'as indispensable forms of any cognition' in 'Transcendental Aesthetics', but he notes that he differs 'from Kant in taking them not as "transcendental" but as forms of the most immediate reality' (84–5).

4 As Taussig also points out, Callois later (the original date of publication of the essay on mimicry was 1935) criticizes his own essay. He relates that, instead of a disturbance of space perception, mimetism can be viewed as 'the insect equivalent of human games of simulation' (1961 [1959]: 178; cited in Taussig 1993: 260). Yet, reference to this argument remains valuable in the context of this article since simulation also involves a radical change in space perception, thus it is still tenable to argue the existence of a relationship between space perception and mimesis.

5 I use the term 'dark play' in the sense put forward by Richard Schechner. It is an informal kind of play in which 'actions continue even though individual players may feel insecure, threatened, harassed, and abused' (Schechner 1993: 27).

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