An Aesthetic Reading of Online Artivist Projects

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Abstract

This article is an essay for a theoretical reading of the contemporary online contents in light of the contemporary aesthetic theories. It focuses on online *artivist* productions and website projects which are related to the resistance movement in Turkey, just before, during and after the Gezi movement period (June 2013). This paper tries to analyze some of the online projects and to discover creative aspects and new trends in internet aesthetics. It also observes participatory quality of online artivist projects and common language in those projects.

Keywords

Artivisim, net art, activism, occupy movements, Gezi, language, information age, and aesthetic experience.

Introduction

Our research aims to establish a theoretical reading of the contemporary online contents in light of the contemporary aesthetic theories. We focus on online *artivist* productions and website projects as contemporary online contents, which are related to resistance movements since 2008 (the great recession) to 2014.

There is a wide range of aesthetic theories in the literature. In our text we will ground on the 'aesthetic experience' notion as it provides us a revisited understanding of aesthetics, arts and their relationship to daily life. According to Dewey, the experience plays an important role in artistic creation. The fundamental element of the process of artistic expression is no longer the material work of art but rather the development of an experience. For Dewey, there is also an aesthetic aspect in 'non-aesthetic' productions and relations. An aesthetic experience cannot be held separate from everyday life experiences and the purpose of the aesthetics is to ensure the continuity between the refined art experience and daily life experience. [1] For Rancière an aesthetic experience is "a reconfiguration of the forms of visibility and intelligibility of artistic practice and its reception." [2] An artwork is "given in a specific experience, which suspends the ordinary connections, not only between appearance and reality, but also between form and matter, activity and passivity, understanding and sensibility." [3] Dewey's and Rancière's writings give us a new perspective on the relation between daily life, aesthetics and art; and enable us to reestablish this relation in today's productions. We also aim to investigate what these artistic and 'non artistic' productions tell about our political and social spaces and lives, as well as our intellectual practices.

This research also investigates the notion of language in online activist artists; training and uses of language as an artistic material and as a message. In our work, we investigate the language as a tool (material) and as a message. Computer codes, acts of hacking or electronic sit-ins represent altogether the material; whereas the written content or shared images represent the message. Our work proposes a comparative approach between different web projects that include pieces recognized as artworks and also popular projects on online social networks. We construct our theoretical reading in three main sections. First, we will analyze the political and social background. Then, we will identify contemporary *artivist* projects (from Turkey). Finally, we will explore the online content producers and their organization behind the projects.

Social and Political Background

We have been witnessing a transformation from industrial to post-industrial society: the change of societal organization as a result of subordination of the materials (raw materials, machinery) to intangibles (knowledge and information). Developments in digital technology have brought a significant change especially in the field of communication and media, but also in professional and social life. Before then, the communication paradigm was "one-to-many"; after the (r)evolution of the media this paradigm has been replaced by "many-to-many". This change refers to the passage from a mass society to a networked society. [4] Although there are still regional inequalities to access to new technologies and to new media content; the 'new medias' are altering the sense of geographical distance, increasing the communication volume, allowing numerous channels for the flow of information, providing an opportunity to increase communication speed and for interactive communication, and finally maintaining the possibility to ensure interconnection between the different forms of communication. [5]

Along with those changes in economic and socio-cultural production there have been riots in several countries in the world. The causes and consequences of those riots are differentiated by countries but there are unignorable similarities that we are interested to discover: the resistance movements built a new language and created intelli-

gent and ironic web projects which are related to creative productions on the streets. We affirm that those web projects and online productions offer us aesthetic experiences in Rancière's and Dewey's terms.

The Projects

In the 1990s in Europe, especially in Eastern Europe and Italy, we encounter activist artistic projects which interrogate notions of information, reality, and perception. These projects were influenced mainly by the writings of William S. Burroughs and Hakim Bey on the media and the manipulation of information. [6] Both authors proposed to 'hack' Medias (tools of communication). Hacktivists created pirate radios and TVs, fanzines, fake personalities, etc. We realize that similar projects appeared in Turkey within the period since the second part of the 2000s to 2014, densely just before, during and after the Gezi movement period (June 2013).

We also observe blending of 'virtual life' and 'real life' experiences, transitions between the streets and the internet. It might be necessary to mention that the relationship between the streets and the internet is a question of power struggle; here we refer to Henri Lefebvre to understand this conflict, the characters of those two spaces and their importance in the resistance movements. [7] Both the streets and the internet are social spaces and they are subject to the social movements as social products, where we may observe control, domination, and power struggles between the people and the political authority. Two remarkable examples of the transition from the Gezi movement: Standing Man and Rainbow Stairs were civil disobedience acts which are reproduced afterwards in several cities, and images from all over the country had been circulated on the internet.

Hoax News Websites

One of the projects that we observe is hoax news website *Zaytung*. *Zaytung* questions the 'realities' of everyday life and politics. It interrogates the media's attitude in disinformation and also truthfulness of the news broadcasted by mass media organs. We also observe similar websites in other countries: The Onion (USA), Le Gorafi (France), News That Matters Not (India), El Koshary Today (Egypt), etc. [8]

We examined that in the hoax news websites; articles are about current events, politics and politicians, but also the lifestyle which is presented as *American Dream* for the middle class workers, especially for whom working in *Bullshit Jobs* (referring to the jobs in the service sector which do not lead to a real production) in Graeber's words. [9] Visually hoax news websites look like the websites of the 'real' newspapers; they also have weekly magazines where the authors criticize the content of such magazines. For example in the mass media, we usually notice articles entitled "Where to eat this weekend?" That's how they make publicity of the restaurants, and also a specific way

of life, amazing holidays, etc. The hoax news websites transform or *detourne* those articles with humor, as International Situationists would do. [10] For example, in the satirical newspaper article, the writer claims to be invited to a student's place in the weekend, and writes that there was only pasta to eat in order to underline the reality in contrast to the constructed image by the mass media. They also prefer to use the mass media's language, to mock, as it was an article in *The Wall Street Journal* or *Le Monde*.

We claim that their production can be seen as awakeners, the content offers us a moment of alienation (a disruption point) in Brechtian way (*distancing effect* or *estrangement effect*). We may read their work by Dadaists' claim: "*Art, should not be an escape from daily events, but should instead make visible the violence, chaos and hypocrisies of contemporary life.*" As Hugo Ball also says: "*For us, art is not an end in itself [...] but it is an opportunity for true perception and criticism of the time we live in.*".

Fake Personalities

Especially in 1990s fake personality phenomenon was common: *Luther Blissett, Darko Maver* (one of the projects of 0100101110101101.org), *Harry Kipper* were already known with their mystified histories. *Yes Men* of RTMark is also one of the well-known examples of spoof characters: Two activists, Jacques Servin and Igor Vamos (alias Andy Bichlbaum and Mike Bonanno) who mock liberalism and criticize the liberal economic system satirically by making presentations on behalf of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and in the name of Dow Chemicals (widely protested multinational company of chemicals). *Yes Men* built fake sites that gather the originals (the one for G.W. Bush is no more available, but the fake WTO website is still accessible). *Yes Men* also distributed fake copies of New York Times with the title "War in Iraq is over" in 2008. In their projects, we observe a criticism of the political and economical system but also the media and the information sources of the society. Obviously they were not the first who created fake personalities or fake satirical newspapers; here we should mention Mark Twain's satirical newspaper articles and Orson Welles' film *F for Fake* and his radio show *War of the Worlds*.

In Turkey, a fake personality was created as *Şafak Başgan* following the Gezi movement (affected summer of 2013). During local elections in March 2014, there was a candidate named *Şafak Başgan* who lead an alternative campaign by creating a satirical personality, especially using the social media, Facebook and Twitter. [11] His Facebook page got 10720 likes and he has 5600 followers on Twitter (May 2015). His project was born as a reaction to gentrification politics of the city of Istanbul and the *crazy projects* of the Turkish government. [12] (Figure 1)

His campaign's visuals, videos and language are worth to analyze because again we can read those materials as *awakeners* and *détournements*. His campaign was criticizing political scene, existing parties, and neoliberal politics applied by the government and the mayor of Istanbul. His campaign was claiming that none of the candidates (includ-

ing the opposition) are worth to vote for. Some people were not supporting his choice of mocking political scene, but his campaign forced people to think about it.
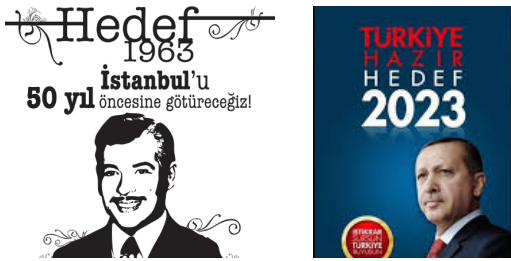

Figure 1. On the left, Safak Basgan "Vision 1963: We will take Istanbul back to 60s!" On the right, ex PM Erdogan "Vision 2023, Turkey is Ready!" (2023 is the 100th anniversary of Turkish Republic)

Hacking – Code Writing

Hacking is also another example of aesthetic experience as a performance and also as a creative act. In Turkey, we observe electronic sit-ins like the *Electronic Disturbance Theater*'s performances especially when the society was discussing the new internet law and censorship in 2011. *RedHack* (*Anonymous* like hacker group, active since 2005) took down some governmental websites and leaked information in several operations. A virtual protest was also organized via Google Maps which gathered thousands of people at Taksim square on Google Maps. [13] (Figure 2)
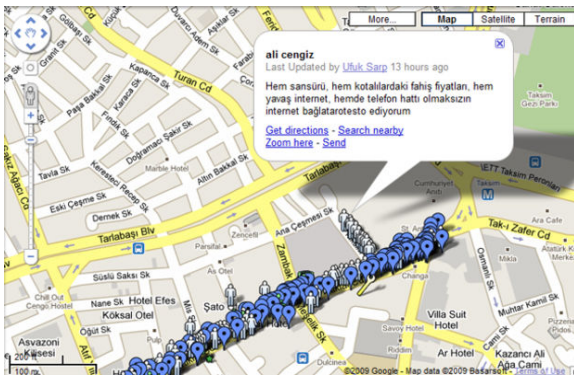

Figure 2. Protest on Google Maps, 25 January 2010.

Figure 3. RedHack's hack on public buses, Istanbul, 2013.

In 2013, during the Gezi resistance, RedHack hacked the screens inside the public transport services (public buses in Istanbul), to say that the resistance will continue as they wrote "Durak yok, yola devam" which means "No station, keep going on" where it should be written "will stop in the next station". This was a clear allusion to the slogan of the government party (AKP) "Don't Stop, Keep Going On!". (Figure 3)

Photoshopped Posters and *Caps/Memes*

We've noticed *photoshopped* posters and captures as well. Due to the 2.0 version of internet and the simplification of interfaces, computer and internet users had the possibility to create or manipulate images. As a simple internet user, anybody has an access to huge amount of data to use to reproduce, to manipulate; and these users also have possibility to diffuse their productions online. (Figure 4)

Bobiler is an alternative online platform where the users may share the *caps*, videos, or images they created or manipulated. As we already mentioned for other projects, in this website and those productions we may observe a common language as well. [14] Here we analyze the *Bobiler* community and we realized that even if such platform
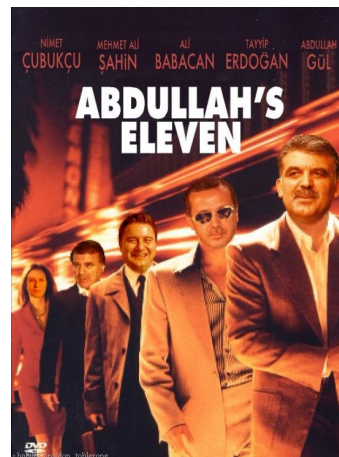

Figure 4. A *photoshopped* (manipulated) movie poster

does not exist in other countries, the practice of photoshopped images and caps/memes was observed. (Figure 5)

Those productions are driving us to reconsider our daily and political lives, with a sense of humor and intelligence. Depending their qualities, they attract much or less attention.

Who produces those projects?

Content producers are observed to be generally between 20 and 30 years old young students or workers in several examples according to our interviews with the initiators. We see that those who filled the streets intersect at a very large proportion with those who produce and consume on the internet. The youngsters bring a dynamic aspect and perpetuity to the movements and to the online projects.

The production process is collective and participative. In general, these projects are the products of network communities composed of individuals from different social

Figure 5. A *caps(meme)*, Obama: "No, you first."

backgrounds (majorly middle-upper class, mostly leftists); with a group of editors in charge (see Zaytung, Bobiler, Ekşi Sözlük, etc.). The content creators have pseudonyms which are also part of the satirical content. In hacking activities the participants are anonymous and they also act collectively. We observe that both users and visitors are especially from the big cities, Istanbul in the first place, Ankara, and Izmir then the rest of the country; similar to the number of internet users across the country.

On collective production of the content or an action, we may refer to the notion of *social sculpture*, attributed to Beuys, it is not required being a geek, an expert or a member of an artistic community to create and share satirical texts or artistic productions. Walter Benjamin's listener participative radio idea also corresponds to the idea of collective production of individuals.

Conclusion

In this article we analyze contemporary online contents in light of the contemporary aesthetic theories. We focus on online artivist productions and website projects which are related to the resistance movement in Turkey. We discover the disruptive and creative forces of the analyzed projects, and investigate new trends in internet aesthetics, observe participatory cultures of online *artivist* projects and the importance of language in those projects. We observe that they create an aesthetic experience and an occasion for alienation both for users and visitors.

We can state that it is necessary to broaden our research to the other countries and constitute a comparative approach between these countries where different resistance or Occupy movements occurred, such as Greece, United States, Egypt and Tunisia.

Finally, as the resistance notion became a popular 'image' and 'trend', it turned into an object of consumption

for different social groups. So, it will be interesting as well to question the role of the *artivist* projects in the market as new intellectual merchandises.

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