

# **SHESHOW**

**Photography, Digital Print, Video, Installations**

## **From Istanbul**

**at ATA Center for Contemporary Art, Sofia, Bulgaria**

**March 2002**

**Yeşim Agaoglu / Özgül Arslan / Handan Börüteçene/ Elif Çelebi / İnci Eviner / Gül Ilgaz / Neriman Polat / Ani Setyan / Sermin Sherif / Gonca Sezer**

When I was invited to make an exhibition in ATA Center for Contemporary Art in Sofia, I had the irrepressible impulse to make a show with women artists. This might seem quite old-fashioned, obsessive and feminist approach, but I am taking the risks of this rooting for a team; if I will find collaborators in Sofia, I will be more than happy.

The main objectives of inviting women artists from Istanbul to this exhibition are: They are producing notable and arresting works. Furthermore, within the transition period (Turkey is also going through a transition period) we are living in, we have to face the reality that women are still struggling more than the men for their political, economic and cultural positions in the societies with prevailing traditional values. Finally, we know that theory and practice in art is traditionally male.

Post-modernism was an ally for women artists; however it is not easy to change the status quo. In order to challenge the meta-narratives for the articulation of excluded subjects of a society – among them women of all classes and professions – one has to transform the modernist gaze of the audiences and reassess the institutions. In other words, issues were never quite resolved. However, the so-called traditional female qualities of sharing, communication, flexibility and a desire to collaborate are becoming more and more important (1) and they have a great deal to offer to contribute to the fundamental changes that are taking place in our countries.

In the historical background of our territory, during Anatolian Civilizations before Christ, in Byzantium and during the Ottoman Empire some upper class women are mentioned to have an episodic central role in the society. I will refer here to a historic event between 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> century during the period of iconoclasm in Byzantium that will allegorically correlate to the Orthodoxy and to the position and identity of women in the collective memory of our societies. In Byzantium, women of all classes had opposed the official politics of the state and have played a militant role in maintaining the worship of icons. When in 726 or 730 the great icon of Christ which was displayed on the Chalky Gate of the Great Palace, the women have rebelled and demonstrated in the streets of Constantinople. Two empresses Irene and Theodore have restored the worship of icons around 850. What was the reason of this attachment to the icons? The women of Byzantium had a very limited role in the society and they were confined to their homes and daily occupations. Icons were the only private way to practice their religion. As a result, iconoclasts have acquired anti-feminist view and even questioned the role of Virgin Mary! (2).

Even though we cannot speak about a calculated women's art movement in Turkey, we can distinguish a definite emergence of women artists since the beginning of 1980's. And this emergence never had the distinct form of women coming together and exhibiting their work in solidarity; on the contrary from the beginning, women artists were invited to artists associations and exhibitions organized by men artists. Similarly we cannot define a feminist avant-garde art during the early and late modernism; feminism or a kind of women's identity in art was not politically manifested in art works. Early modernist like Hale Asaf, late modernists like Sükriye Dikmen, Fahrel Nissa Zeid were not so marginal in their art and were not exposed to a discrimination; they were too minor in number to be considered as rivals for men. Neither in the late 70's when Füsün Onur produced arte-povera-like fragile installations, nor in the 80's when Nur Koçak displayed her fetish-object paintings, Jale Erzen and Hale Arpacioğlu have painted in neo-expressionist style the women artists pursuit of individuality and exploitation was noticed as a feminist challenge. After the first two International Istanbul Biennale, Ayşe Erkmen, Gülsün Karamustafa, Canan Beykal, Handan Börüteçene, İnci Eviner have presented their conceptual and post-modern works. Feminism or women's identity only step by step became the principal site for struggle in art. Beginning of 90's there are many success stories of women artists such as Hale Tenger, Şükran Aziz, Canan Tolon, Ebru Özseçen, Esra Ersen, Şükran Moral. Since the end of the 90's surprisingly striking works are being produced by women artists from different generations and backgrounds. Others who are gaining recognition - among them, Gonca Sezer, Canan Şenol, Özgül Arslan, Şeyda Cesur, Elif Çelebi, Neriman Polat, Gül Ilgaz, Sermin Sherif and many others - are challenging and dealing with patriarchal family structure, sexual repressions, child and women abuse, media influence on women and women as a fetish object in the welfare society.

Modern art was considered elitist and failed to address the political, post-modern art is also too sophisticated to be perceived by the official and private institutions that are supposed to fund art and what is more, not only the women's work in art but also the men's art is being devaluated and ignored as a source of political protest. On the other hand, who and what can compete with the commodity and media culture and gain ground? Yet, the women artists no doubt suffered of being women in a patriarchal culture, of being excluded from decision-making positions, of being discouraged in realizing their projects and ideas. Art was not the field for feminist debate and is still not. Most of the women artists have gained their firm position through their increasing attachment to the international art world. At present, feminism in art appears to be old-fashioned and passé, even though the middle and lower class women in Turkish society are still marginal players and exposed to male dominance. The middle upper class intellectual women – women artists (and curators) are included into this class - have learned to act strategically and within the rules of the play.

The title of the exhibition is one of the strategies I am articulating – in relation to their works - for the advantage of the exhibition with women artists. Tolerating the attention and interest of the public to the entertainment world and fulfilling the expectations of conceited audiences I mockingly entitle the exhibition **Sheshow** (with obviously strong associations to Peepshow). I challenge the stereotyping attitudes, remind the misuse of women in the media and

advertisement and play on the issues never resolved. The rest will be done by the works of the artists.

Beral Madra / February 2002

1. *Debbie Duffin, Exhibiting Strategies, New Feminist Art Criticism, Manchester University Press, 1995, p 69*
2. *Nevra Necipoğlu, Women in Byzantium, Gösteri, Dec. 1993, p.110-114*