Journal of American Studies of Turkey
25 (2007) : 67-86

Gesture after the Gestural: Abstract Expressionism, American Visual Culture and Post-War Painting in Turkey

Lewis Johnson

It has been noted, in a number of different contexts, that post Second World War visual culture has been significantly shaped by practices, meanings and what has often been referred to as media—but might better be thought of as forms—that emerged in or were developed and effectively disseminated from the U.S. The continued significance of Hollywood cinema, for example, seems not to be underestimated in the assessment, by Bernard Steigler, that it is the cultural form of a certain type of narrative fiction film that has been effectively at work in the "'macdonaldization' of the world" (Steigler 100) pre- and post second World War. On the other hand, and concerning the later period more particularly, Jonathan Crary has articulated a strong case linking the television screen and the windscreen of the car in a co-operation that "reconciled visual experience with the velocities and discontinuities of the marketplace" (Crary 284). Both of these hypotheses, then, could be used to suggest the importance of "American" or U.S. visual culture, picking out certain developments in life in Turkey since the end of the Second World War: the first providing us, for example, with a context (along with that of European Art Cinema) for approaching the emergence of an actively different Turkish cinema particularly during the 1960s (Erdoğan 261), and the second, given the encouragement offered to road-building in Turkey by the U.S. since the 1950s, suggesting a mode of the promotion and—particularly since the de *facto* and then legalized deregulation of television broadcasting in Turkey in 1990 and 1994 (Çaplı and Tuncel 196-7)—the expansion of a vigorously capitalist culture.

However, in this paper, I shall be seeking to demonstrate that both of these hypotheses require a third in order both that the seductive power of American visual culture may be better understood *and* so as to be able to show how that the hold of that culture is incomplete and has been (and is likely to continue to be) effectively interrupted. Steigler's hypothesis concerning the Americanization of the world largely by means of a dominant Hollywood cinematic form needs to remain incomplete, imperfect as a hypothesis, in order to allow for the emergence of the counter practices and forms of Yeşilçam cinema. Further, Crary's clever argument depends on a sense of imaginary action as it is provoked by television

and guided towards an imagined fulfilment in the scanning of the landscape through the windscreen of the car, a fulfilment that remains imaginary even while the viewer-driver drives as if anywhere, enacting the go-as-if-anywhere deterritorializing movement required of labour under capitalism. The television viewer, at least before the advent of flat screen television, looks through the convexity of the screen, with what is shown at the edges there subtly stretched and then foreshortened. The car driver views through another "screen," as if actualizing and/or compensating for the distortions of what she or, more likely, he has seen, remembered and desired from the screen at home. Apparently insisting on the split between private dwelling and public space, public space is also that which is threatened by the excessiveness of the fantasies of the private, requiring, in Crary's Foucauldian argument, its policing as the space of the conformity of private desires to a public will.

Following Crary's hypothesis through, then, it is tempting to imagine that there is a trace of resistance to this modelling of public space by means of a "private" actor schooled in the vicissitudes of desire by means of the U.S. television drama in the dramas of road use in Turkey. Fifty people dead after traffic accidents in the recent Kurban Bayram, not to mention the hundred or so injured, as it was reported today, January 4, 2007, in the news. Public information campaigns of the late 1990s, seeking to warn road users of the undesirability of losing one's temper behind the wheel, may have "backfired" (this figure of speech, of course, already an account of something going wrong with a motorised vehicle) because, despite the warnings of the slogan accompanying the red and white figure, what that figure offered by way of an opportunity for identification was more desirable as model than the more judicious position of identification offered by the text. This account, which tends to repeat the notion that images are more powerful than words, would not, however, take account of this possibility of resistance to the modelling of space, the sadly heroic chancing of life on (or just a little way off) the highway.

What is at stake in these accounts of the influence of the U.S. or "American" visual culture? Returning to Steigler's grander sounding, but perhaps oddly more modest hypothesis, it may be understood that, in order for either of these theses to work as much as they promise to, the modelling of action needs to be further considered. It would not be news that there was resistance to such Americanization. Steigler himself is interested in what he calls the "cultural exception," indicating that he himself understands that this has by no means been complete or total. How, though, can we both accept that U.S. visual culture has been powerful to the point of influencing people and the things that they

do, while at the same time leaving room for an understanding of resistance? And what does such an understanding involve? How is the hypothesis that there is resistance not just to add up to the same as there being no effective resistance?

In this paper, I want to propose that the study of visual culture needs to attend to the series of forms of visual "objects" or texts in a way which gets inside Crary's imaginative and inventive hypothesis by treating the way in which passage across the framings of visual texts is guided. Such passage involves the ways in which a text attracts or distracts, holds or repels attention (as Crary's later work has itself explored), but also the ways in which it proffers models and modellings of what lies beyond its framings: movements, that is, that are both from outside to in and inside to out. What is particular to a visual text lies in an economy of these movements—by which I do not mean an "economizing," or some stable and essential character of the visual "object," but rather the modes of its conducting, including the relative jamming, of involvement in its effects, including its effects of meaning. The value of a consideration of the inter-relation of different kinds of visual "objects" or what I shall call (given that linguistic "objects" or texts, among others, also conduct, and jam, involvement across certain frames) texts is twofold: more pragmatically, the ways in which the frames of different types of visual texts are accounted for provides us with ways in which cultures can be understood to take place (culture, including visual culture, is not a repository of stable values; rather, it is the relations between texts and their "uses" of all kinds, from its norms of "comprehension" to its modes of uncomprehending apprehension); and, more essentially, and significantly for the question of the influence of the U.S. visual culture, how worlds are made, unmade or re-made according to the ways in which texts bring certain objects into being.

This paper aims to show, therefore, that what has been called, at least since the publication in 1952 of an influential critical essay by Harold Rosenberg, American action painting of the post Second World War era offers a case in which a certain norm of the comprehension of a series of visual texts and the generation of certain objects of emulation—in painting, but also beyond—can be retraced. Over fifty years, and many critical and revisionist accounts later, a renewed attempt to understand the influence of work by Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, Willem de Kooning, Adolph Gottlieb, Clifford Still, Franz Kline or Mark Tobey, but also Robert Motherwell, Helen Frankenthaler and Lee Krasner, if not the emigré Armenian, Ashille Gorky, might at least promise something more than a reiteration if it could be shown that the ways in which such work has tended to be understood has relied on a notion that has guided

but restricted the generation of objects of emulation. This notion, as the place of Pollock at the head of this list of artists may suggest, is crucially that of gesture as action, or what has come to be called "the gestural." For it is my contention that the notion of action painting, and that of "the gestural" in painting, in the existentialist criticism of Rosenberg, but also in the revisions of the discourse of Peircian semiotics, if not speech act theory, of the last few decades, misconstrue the nature of gesture. In so doing, such accounts obscure and remain complicit with an understanding of art and culture that falsely segregates these two as objects, as if art were decidedly not culture, or, alternatively, and with an uncannily similar voluntaristic and subject-centring effect, as if it were nothing but culture; or, at least, and in effect, a sort of unknown space of culture.

The influence of American action painting, then, would be in providing a model of the artist-as-painter whose every painterly gesture was the very element of action, a will to paint as a will to act (no decadence here: this would be an essentially serious art). Uncannily, as I mentioned, and I shall show, critical revisions of this existentialist discourse have tended largely to expose the ways in which such a drive to authenticity is dogged by impossibility, re-reading the traces of artistic painterly activity as so many signs of interiority, seeking to impress itself in exteriority. The commonsense of this legacy of critical appropriation and re-appropriation would be—typically enough, where art is concerned—that it ought to be something that can be understood as valuable, but which fails to get its message across. As we shall see, this is something already anticipated in the criticism of Rosenberg, something which is read by him, in recuperative fashion, as an indication in favour of the purity of the intention-to-act, unwillingly caught up in the frames of art. This restitution of the meaning of painting, as action, becomes the model for the passage across the space of the image, a will-to-act in realization of itself, irrespective of what it may have picked up along the way.

My hypothesis, then, concerning this mode of the comprehension of post-war U.S. art, is that there is a disavowal of the play of the legibilities of gesture, and of the contexts of such legibility, in favour of its capitalized significance as will-to-act. Recent accounts of such painting in terms of the "performative," whilst allowing for a reconstruction of the ways in which the so-called neo-dadaist painting and/or sculpture of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, or the work of an Allan Kaprow, Jim Dine or Claes Oldenburg in art as performance and environment, if not Eva Hesse in sculptural work, as well as many later artists in and across such genres, may be understood to renegotiate the signs of the making of art in response to the emphatic model of abstract expressionist

painting, nevertheless tends to confirm abstract expressionism as model not simply for art, but also—depending on the detail of the use of this (sometimes) useful notion of the performative—for action, via the model of artistic activity. The question of what may be artistic about activity goes begging (Hopkins 34).

This paper also aims to show how, in the thinking of and in work by Turkish artist Ömer Uluç, and in comparison with other Turkish artists, how this model of artistic activity has been engaged: how a certain signature-effect of his use of paint emerges as a negotiation of the model of gestural art, which he would redirect by means of a re-engagement with a problematic of the classical tradition of the representing of living beings. This preoccupation with the classical vocation of painting, a vocation that may be said to antedate modern, if not postmodern divisions of Western and Eastern, has also been read as a rediscovery of regional and Eastern traditions of mark-making, in particular that of calligraphy. Uluç himself has consistently resisted this identification of his work. Commenting on Uluç's *Köpekli aile* [*Family with Pet*] of 1996 [figure 1], John Ash, in his catalogue essay, reiterates this point familiar from Uluç's discourse of the last thirty or so years:

> Uluç is right. It does not resemble calligraphy. It is more like watching subterrenean waters rise to the surface of a spring. (Ash 16-7)

The classical framing of painting is reiterated: what is painted resembles what lives or appears to live beyond the frame. The letter lacks spirit, and marks in painting are to be referred for preference to what would be closer to it: bodies, pre-eminently, as in the classical formulation of painting as *zoographia*, the painting of living beings, but where these are not, the traces of such bodies is to be preferred. Ash's comparison, here, perhaps offers us the spring as an event of nature, rather than as some site cultivated by man. It is not, however, unequivocal, even while the preferred reading is more likely the former. In resembling the appearance of the rising of subterrenean waters, Uluç's painting would report on the subjective effects of phenomena, rather than on any more objective object. Uluç has many times commented on an interest in boundaries between the abstract and figurative, perhaps most revealingly in an interview in 1986 when referring to the ". . . the narrow passage of the abstract and the figurative [that] had to do with the place I live in and its history" (Henric 1989). And it is not misleading, I believe, to link an experience of gesture in Uluç's work with a communication of an existence in space that is marked by a complex of experiences of İstanbul, involving phenomena of the spaces of interiors, the sea, its changing lights, if also (as in the *Submarine* and *Tanker* series of 1984 and

1985) its socio-political significance, as well as Byzantine and Ottoman visual culture, including its uses of the Baroque.

This last point is suggested by Sezer Tansuğ, but in a way that avoids thinking of this as a citation of the appearances of (among others) an Ottoman İstanbul Baroque. The desire to claim for Uluç a place in a lineage of important modern artists tends to dictate the formulations of this critical account, as the title of Tansuğ's essay, "A Logic of Progress" may be understood to indicate. But what has not been accepted, in the 1980s or 1990s criticism of Uluç's work, is the role of the undecidablity of citation as a way of understanding what Uluç's signature-effect of looped and crossed figurings of paint brings with it by way of a series of contexts of visual experience, including if not calligraphy itself also, then what I shall call a more generic "calligraphic," as part of a way of keeping open the meaning and value of the spaces of painting as something other than the space of evidence of a terminal gesture. Neither simply major nor minor, neither tragic nor comic, Uluç's work has been significantly guided by a necessary contestation of the meaning-value of the gestural. His resistance to an accounting of his work in relation to calligraphy is born of an understandable resistance to the localizing of his work in relation to exclusively regional visual traditions, a trope of the nativism of a neo-colonialist and neo-orientalist accounting for places as exemplifying or lacking the signs of progress. Tansuğ's critical essay is, fairly clearly, vitiated by this, and by a host of disavowals of the complexities of traditions (for Tansuğ, painting in Turkey, including calligraphy and embroidery [?], has "never had any link with theoretical notions, only with formal concerns,)" if also of an incoherence in the hierarchies of conceptualizations of experience in Western culture (the "historical conditions" that made possible the comprehension of painting *"only in terms of painting itself"* [his italics] is "based upon the essence of contemporary observation which is also built on historical consciousness" (Tansuğ 23).

The opposition between the contemporary and the historical sustains the would-be modernism of Tansuğ's account of Uluç's work, failing to register the way in which the question of gesture in art brings with it not only a problematic of the simulacral (in relation to which the issue of calligraphy and what I termed the "calligraphic" may, in part, by situated), but also of the ways in which the contemporary may precisely be understood as opening onto an unknown history. Rather than the architectonics of modernist historiography, in which tradition provides the foundation for a critical reassessment of a breaking away via what is essential in particular arts, like painting, or in art in general (the dominant object of promotion in and as discourses of contemporary art), the

recovery of the contemporary as the passage of gesture across the frame, with its traces, difficult to decipher though they may be, of what lies beyond, not least because of the generation of effects of encounter in the meeting, for example, of paint and support, requires that the contemporary be renounced as something art either is or is not. The term "contemporary" as used in connection with art names a problem, rather than a fact: Is what is current contemporary? What would make something contemporary rather than just current? One answer (if, indeed, not the only one) to these questions is to be found in this discovery of a history that gives a chance to a different sense of future, one, in the case of art in Turkey, that is not dominated by models of acceptance or rejection of Western, or American, art and visual culture.

In order to demonstrate this in detail, in connection with Uluç's work, as well as that of Adnan Çoker, let me return to the failures of the comprehension of gesture as the gestural in connection with abstract expressionism. The succinct formulation of this failure, the formulation that solicits failure as its criterion of art, is a brief, but crucial paragraph by Harold Rosenberg in his 1951 essay, "The American Action Painters." He has just pointed out that such artists (mentioning none by name) are not young (certainly not by today's international art world standards) having been around since the 1930s, have either, being or being in sympathy with Marxists, been painting society or, following the models of European art, like Cubism or Post-Impressionism, painting art. Having earlier argued, in effectively an idealist fashion, and in what will become a critical matter for later art and criticism, that the new painting has "broken down every distinction between art and life," drawing attention away from "aesthetic references" and towards "the kind of act taking place in the four-sided arena," Rosenberg seals the miscomprehension of painting, art and gesture that is characteristic of the discourse of the gestural:

> The big moment came when it was decided to paint . . . just TO PAINT. The gesture on the canvas was a gesture of liberation, from Value—political, aesthetic, moral. (Rosenberg 39-40)

It is sometimes difficult to unravel the valuable hints towards the critical issues at stake in Rosenberg's criticism, though here, in respect of this crucial topic, what is problematic is quite explicit. When a painting doesn't resemble something, or, as he has said in the opening paragraph of the second section of his essay, "reproduce, redesign, analyse or 'express' an object, actual or imagined," and we are invited to see it "not as a picture but an event" (Rosenberg 36), it seems, to him, and to many since, as if it can only be the event of an action, or,

at least, the record of such an action. The painting and/or picture would thus become a pure evidence of gesture as action, something "on the canvas." In line with a transcendentalism that is not uncommonly unacknowledged in the discourses of U.S. culture, though which Rosenberg (who has read Emerson, as well as Jean-Paul Sartre) admits earlier ("The work, the act, translates the psychologically given into the intentional, into a 'world'—and thus transcends it." (582)), mind is the latent object of an affirmation, even at the moment when matter and the body are conjoined, "on the canvas."

In a way that is unsurprisingly repeated in discourses on art (as well as much else), Rosenberg brings together the body and matter in his account of gesture, as he had done in the second paragraph of his essay. If he had, in part, renounced the notion of a picture, and of "aesthetic references" ("reference" being again an unsurprising, but misleading linguistic notion when conjoined with pictures, let alone with pictures, or objects, as art), he had not given up a notion of image, as the following makes clear:

> The painter no longer approached his easel with an image in his mind; he went up to it with material in his hand to do something to that other piece of material in front of him. The image would be the result of this encounter. (Rosenberg 36-7)

The allure of an abject body, body merging with matter, haunts this portrayal of the "encounter" between the body, paint and canvas, the first facing, if not giving face to, the last. This trace of orientation, put in question by Pollock's activities, painting on a canvas on the floor, echoes and rejoins a critical nexus of modern aesthetics, at least since Kant's account of the sublime, that would secure the value of art as a sign, a means of indication, as it were, for the body in space (Derrida 132-3). It would be another American critic, Leo Steinberg, who, twenty years later, would respond to this strain of the residue of the orientational in the discourse on abstract expressionism in his critical promotion of the work of Robert Rauschenberg via what he termed "the flat-bed picture plane." Conjoining suggestions of scanning, even of a saccadic vision, moving laterally, rather than looking ahead, with that of printed pictures as well as text (the "flat-bed" is a term used to refer to a type of printing press), Steinberg's promotion of Rauschenberg's collage and combine-painting work is linked with an early articulation of a notion of the "post-modernist." Contesting the articulation of the "optical" in the later 1950s and 1960s criticism of Greenberg and Fried, Steinberg proposes a sense of space of art in which the sense of distance that would be achieved either in the Kantian sublime or the experience

of the opticality of the image would be disturbed in favour of what his text terms “a symbolic continuum of litter, workbench, and data-ingesting mind” (Steinberg 89). Prescient as this may seem of experiences of digital workspace, it is still articulated as a relating of body, if also mind, and matter.

The stakes of the questioning of the “gestural” are thus complex. But, if gesture is not evidenced “on the canvas” as traces in matter, as the discourses of the “gestural” either suggest or claim, then how is gesture in painting, or elsewhere, to be understood? Some success, in critical writing since the 1970s, has apparently been had of the use of the terms and conceptualities developed by C.S. Peirce, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. To take just one case, the art historian and theorist Margaret Iversen argued in favour of using the Peircian triadic typology of signs, the symbol, the icon and the index, rather than the signified/signifier diadic problematic of the Saussurean sign. The role of the case of a painting by Pollock in her argument is worth pausing over, in order to see how a counter-narrative to Rosenbergian authenticity is staged, even while a crucial axiom of the understanding of gesture “in” painting goes missing.

For Iversen, the value of semiotics is to expose the heterogeneity of the signs that are used to make art. The Saussurean sign, as a conceptualization of visual objects, is weak because its postulate of an arbitrary relation between signifier and signified does not successfully grasp the non-arbitrary or “‘motivated’” relation between what a picture looks like and what it signifies (Iversen 85). The double determination of the Saussurean sign is neglected, however, in this objection. Saussure’s unstable axiom of the arbitrariness of the sign (there are onomatopoeic linguistic signifiers that sound like what they signify, as well as, say, blue “signifiers” signifying blue objects) is related to the more destabilizing axiom of the differential character of the signifier: the “arbitrary” signifier is referred, in its functioning as sign, to the differential system of which it is part, “p” working as “p” when, for example, it doesn’t sound like “b” (an unreliable difference that Turkish protects by exchanging the former for the latter in grammatical compounds of “kitap” or “kebap”). This activity of referring, across differences with “no positive terms” as Saussure formulated it, is indicative of a “functioning” of a system in the “comprehension” of signs, operations that, often, go unnoticed, but which can be, in exceptional instances, brought to notice. In the case of visual texts, we might consider the case of colour: blue is often blue, but sometimes it is blue because it is not green. (This is about what is usually called the “experience” of colour, not just the words used to refer to “it.”) What Derrida sought to indicate by the term “différance” is at work here, the differing-deferring of the signifier in the problematization of meaning and/or reference.

We may trace some of the implications of undecidabilities of referring as the operation of "différance" in connection with work by Pollock. Returning to Iversen's argument, it may be noted that what is missed in the promotion of a Peircean semiotics is, paradoxically, the operativity of the frames of visual texts. This ends up leaving transcendentalist, if not existentialist-type claims of the evidentiality of gestural marks in place. Peirce's typology of symbol, icon and index repeats a concern for the difference between the "verbal" and the "visual" in a way that confirms the hold of a Western metaphysics over the thought of signification. Language is (mostly) made up of symbols, signs that signify something "by contract or rule" (Iversen 89)—what Saussure brought further into question as that infamous "arbitrary." Visual texts may "contain" symbols, as when a tree means "life" (as in traditions of allegorical deciphering, we may "know" that a tree is part of life, is alive, but we are also supposed to "know" the difference between this kind of knowledge and knowledge through interpretation, in which something stands for something else), but pictures are largely icons, in Peirce's sense: signs that signify or represent (no difference in this theorisation here) because they resemble something, a picture of a tree resembling the appearances of a tree for someone. Peircean thought reduces vision: while claiming that the "image" of a tree that we "see" because the thing is pictured in our eyes is also a sign, and we are interpreters, in a process of what he calls "infinite semiosis," vision turns out to be a sort of experience of something that is fundamentally illusory, the world being nothing more than a sort of projection of something in the subject.

There has been much use of the third type of Peircean sign, the index, in connection with the criticism of photography. The index, something that signifies because of an "existential bond or connection" to something else, has been used to characterize the impression of an emphatic, if not melancholic photographic effect that, unlike other representational pictures like paintings, what is signified was once there, in front of the camera. Bernard Steigler is one among many who has insisted on this as something that has been fundamentally qualified by the advent of digital imagery: the "chain of luminances" linking our experience of a photograph of, say, Abraham Lincoln to the "touch" of light on his once living flesh is threatened by the scepticism that comes to occupy our credulity which has been brought on by the alteration in the status of what appears to have been photographed in a digital photo (Steigler, "The Discrete Image" 153-4). The indexicality of the photograph, which is also, when it is taken to represent something, an icon, would be brought into question.

But what is indicated here is that the boundary between the Peircean symbol and index is not itself stable. Iversen uses the latter notion to characterize the multiplication of “signs” that stand for Pollock in a painting like *No. 1A* of 1948 [figure 2]. The trails of paint, dripped from sticks, are also accompanied by several hand-prints in the top right-hand corner. The trails of paint would be indexes of Pollock’s movement, as the hand-prints are indexes of his will-to-mark the canvas, even if they are also, like figures in photographs, icons signifying his hands because of resemblance. The attraction of Pollock’s painting, for Iversen, would be in this multiplication of the signs of the artist: effectively, an attraction to the connotation of a gendered power, or will-to-power, that would be indicative of the troubled, and aggressive status of masculinity in American culture, as her subsequent accounts of work by Jasper Johns and Mary Kelly suggests (Iversen 90-2).

The criticism of Pollock as part of the formation, or re-formation, of masculinity is potentially illuminating. Julia Kristeva has perhaps taken this furthest in an account that stresses something of the topology of these signs of “presence,” stressing a sort of sacrificial, Christ-like dispersal of the signs of the body across the space of the picture. Her account responds to that key issue of the orientational in the critical reassessments of art in modern aesthetics that she has sought to rethink. The hand-prints in the right-hand corner of *No.1A* would then be indicative of a tension between a propriating claim on space and the multiplication of the signs of the failure to do other than, as it were, hand-on a sort of desire to occupy that space (Kristeva 35-9).

It is tempting, then, to conclude that Pollock’s work is a sign of failure to exist in space other than by means of this desire to possess and its dispersal, and the point of Kristeva’s criticism is perhaps to raise this issue most acutely. We might conclude that, in so far as this is what is at stake in Pollock’s drip paintings, then his work stands as means of promoting an ecstatic relation to this failure: something that would be complicit with the deterretorializing drive of capitalism, if not of its American promotion. The series of issues that preoccupy critical accounts of U.S. visual culture—capitalism; gender and racial identities—have been drawn in via the undecidabilities of the differences between the Peircian icon and index. To show how the gestural decomposes into such critical issues is significant; but, in order to approach the seduction of U.S. visual culture more closely, but, indeed, tracing a certain resistance to it, to understand how the traces of gesture can be re-read as histories and futures of a corporeality not trapped in the legacies of monotheological or liberationist thinking, we may return to work by Uluç, in contrast to that by his near contemporary Adnan Çoker.

Gesture is not present "on the canvas," as some of the following observations by Uluç testify concerning abstract expressionist painting, work by the American post-painterly abstractionist Morris Louis, published in an interview in Art Press in 1987 and a brief mention of Pollock's work from four years earlier. Uluç first went to the U.S. in 1953, studying engineering, if also, informally, painting, in Texas, Boston and New York in the following four years. His first one-person exhibition took place in 1955 in Boston at the Earl Pilgrim Gallery, two years after his first exhibiting opportunity in a group show with Kuzgun Acar and Güngör Güven at the Maya Galeri in İstanbul. Talking about his time in the U.S. more than three decades after arriving there, Uluç indicates that he became aware of the work of the abstract expressionists:

> During my first visit to the U.S. expressionism was dominating the art scene. This was the period when America was expressing its work of imagination. They were so fond of boldness and risk as if they were involved in some kind of gold rush. I was impressed a lot by this. (Tansuğ 24)

It is clear, also, from a remark recorded from an interview in 1983, concerning the "dynamism" of American compared to the "impotence" of French abstraction, that Uluç was drawn, like many painters from elsewhere (though unlike most Turkish painters of the time), to take greater notice of work from the U.S. of the 1950s, as part of the shift in the sense of what counted in modern art in the post-war years from Paris to New York (Henric 111).

But Uluç, like other non-American artists, was not at once drawn entirely to renounce the interests linked with modern art that he associated with the earlier pre-eminence of France. Indeed, following the relatively late emergence in 1963 of something like his characteristic mark-making and use of colour, what he termed, in 1969, "fields of colour . . . [that] started twisting about and curling up becoming more and more colourful" (Henric 111). Uluç began to cultivate his association with France, living in Paris, after London and La Haye, for a while in the mid-1960s where he had his first exhibition in France at the Galerie La Roue in 1966. It is perhaps outside the scope of this essay to make a conclusive claim concerning this measured and careful response to abstract expressionism, one that involved Uluç not in a struggle to make his name alongside those of the artists of the American vanguard, but rather in a re-engagement with Paris, the then displaced capital of the art world. It would be my hypothesis, taking into account, for example, the years, from 1973 to 1977, during which Uluç lived and worked in Nigeria, that it is as a response to the neo-colonizing

dominance of U.S. visual culture, including certain strains of U.S. art, that these displacements, from Turkey, via the U.S., to England, France and Nigeria, have been undertaken. Claiming in 1978 that he owed "a lot to a non-Western grand art which is African art," Uluç has also suggested that it is because, in Africa, "There are no anxieties about whether something consists of a figure or not" that, given that his "earliest paintings were like that anyway," he found his time there liberating (Henric 111 and 115). There are thus strong indications that it is the discourses of the criticism of western modernism, in their resistance to the undecidabilities of the modes of signification of pictorial figures that have dictated the split between so-called figurative and abstract painting, if not the correlative desires for certainties concerning visual experience, from which Uluç has wanted to remove himself.

This is not to say that Uluç has not drawn from the work of American artists. Indeed, the removal, geographical and in the terms of his thinking, was only desirable in the terms he has mentioned, I think, given the problematic complicities of the gestural with other forms of American visual culture. His interest in work by Morris Louis that he saw in 1965 is indicative of a concern for a certain loosening of the bonds that were claimed in the gestural between mark-making, freedom and an experience of space. Claiming for Louis' work, like Matisse's, a sense of "inner conflicts not easily seen," Uluç describes a sense of a debt to:

> . . . the feeling of space that moved out from the centre of the painting towards the edge of the canvas and even beyond. (Henric 118)

Louis' pouring of paint and the movement of the support to guide it in its movement across the canvas, rather than the use of brush or even stick, interrupted the correlation between acting and painting in thinking about American painting that the discourse of the gestural entailed [figure 3]. A certain release was thus obtained—this "post-painterly abstractionist" was also post-painter as the complex of body and instrument extended in space—from the paradigm of expressionism, if not of expression as such, in a generation of a sense of gesture that passed into a painting of figures, and tended not to emerge from them, and which brought with them a sense of space that spreads out around a gesture.

The importance of such a sense of gesture can be inferred from Uluç's remarks on Pollock. Contrasting himself with the legendary U.S. artist, Uluç has claimed that he was "not an expressionist," suggesting further that, because

Pollock was "either around [the canvas] or at the centre," that an insistence of a sense of presence of the artist either patrolling the perimeter of a space or occupying it was not what he was seeking (Henric 115). Thus, Uluç distanced himself from the split in the drives which, as noted above, preoccupy Pollock's work, that split between "propriation" and dispersal. When he was asked directly where the gesture that characteristically marks his paintings comes from, and whether it was "the whole body, the arm or just the hand that is in motion," Uluç replied:

> It became habitual to think with this motion. It helped me to find certain ways, repetition of figures, stuttering or the speed, and when it's possible to attain a tension and a livelier image. (Henric 118)

With the stress here falling on "livelier," Uluç confirms that account given above, of his interest in the classical tradition of the zoographic. In this, his work departs from the frames of the expressionist paradigm. Further, this concatenation of the purposes of gesture in the making of his work, from the vague "certain ways" and a sense of an exercise of control in repetition, to the figuration of speaking in "stuttering," followed by the suggestion of an experience of corporeality in "the speed" discovers, in series, some of the critical issues that the discourse of the gestural has assisted in repressing.

Gesture in the painting of figures, even of figures that are thought to represent something, is hardly new. This essay has not aimed to make gesture into a new "gestural," something with a single key to its understanding, like action or liberation. Uluç's account, on the contrary, draws attention towards the heterogeneity of contexts for such an understanding. We might note that gesture is not original: in so far as it is not just movement, and in so far as it appears to signify, even in an emphatic or supplementary way, it is a sort of text. Linked with the vagaries of speech, as in Uluç's "stuttering," if also with starting and stopping having not concluded, it remarks a boundary between the linguistic and non-linguistic, a boundary that preoccupies speakers of languages of all sorts, even while the manifestations of that boundary, folded over as if on itself, closing upon and partially opening up in excess of itself, differ. Marking the users of languages, the reinvention of gesture may be the reinvention of a relation to communication that is not dictated by language and its meanings. The sense of gesture as happenings of space, including a sort of citation of space, that leads as if towards theatre, as in Uluç's odd "certain ways," along with a sense of style, an idiomatic mode of communicating the temporalities of spaces, is perhaps what seals the pact with so-called visual arts, or with what Derrida would rename "the spatial arts" (Derrida, "The Spatial Arts" 12).

What is contested in Uluç's painting would be the nullification of the space of the picture as the space of the evidence of, rather than the complex of traces that comprise, gesture. The ideal field of the erasibility of the idioms of culture, in favour of a model of modernising colonization, gestural painting has functioned as the model for acting in space, leaving traces of the will-to-act that would disperse so as to allow for the remodelling offered via the screens of post-war U.S. visual culture. Not that this has been a deliberate policy, along the lines of the Cold War promotion of abstract expressionist art by CIA-sponsored agencies; more (at least in this context) an exploration of technical possibilities guided by the provocation of the unoccupiability of the spaces of images. The seduction, in particular, of post-war U.S. visual culture is into an imaginary of action that would render relations to the instruments of action as guided by a merging with the body, guided by the ideals of mind that would emerge out of an ecstatic experience of the abject body, the body as introjected and "itself" abjected.

The psychoanalytic theorization necessary to this formulation will have to await any more detailed elaboration and demonstration elsewhere, on another occasion. In conclusion, though, and in order to show how important the U.S. visual culture, including its models and discourses of art, have been, I should like to contrast the sense of gesture that exceeds the paradigm of the gestural as communicated by Uluç's painting with the negotiation of that paradigm in the work of his near contemporary, Adnan Çoker. Like Uluç, Çoker has achieved a sort of eminence in collections of Turkish painting that is remarkable for a consistency of certain elements. The work for which, since the 1960s, Çoker has become known, reuses geometrical figures, a limited palette of blacks, whites, metallic hues, more silver than gold, if also mauves and pinks, often in carefully controlled gradations. The effect is more one of a systematic fading or deepening of colour than of anything more easily read as indicative of mood or affect, and the use of geometric figures also, besides framing and containing what might otherwise be more evocative distributions of colour, tends to suggest certain narratives of a relation not to events of seeing what overwhelms, as with Uluç, but to some imagined and more distant scene, perhaps a non-terrestrial, even cosmic scene.

Such a claim is not meant as a conclusive statement concerning Çoker's "subject matter." An attentiveness to the means of signification in art (though hardly new: Hegel's *Aesthetics* insisted on an attention to a history of form) displaces narrowly authoritative and positivistic accounts of subject matter, statements of accomplished intention, in favour of accounts of meaning-effects that are repeated and/or altered in artistic texts. What is notable about Çoker's

work, in the context of this essay, as large-scale painting after the gestural, is the minimization of the traces of gesture. It is as if, in guiding viewing to those scenes of the cosmic, the artist has dedicated a particular effort to discourage readings that would relate traces of paint to corporeal existence. Not that this would be "direct." This paper has sought to show that this account of gesture in art, the "gestural" account of gesture inherited from abstract expressionism, is an illusory goal of power as force, as if the body were an object of the will of the mind, and gesture simply an emphatic, incontrovertible marking of matter. The criticism of post-war U.S. painting inherited via Rosenberg makes of gesture the ineloquent coda to meaning, rather than, as in classical rhetoric, a persuasive accompaniment to speech.

The problem with Çoker's work would be traceable from its over-determination by the dominance of the discourse of the gestural: as if painting had to avoid traces of gesture in order not to get caught in the complexities of U.S. cultural influence, if not hegemony. It is possible to read the "scenes" of Çoker's work as addressed to the mechanisms if not the processes of vision: looking at the thin rectangular "slits" suspended in space, shifting slightly to and from across an imaginary picture plane, it is as if the apertures of the eyes and a play of light within were being represented [figure 4]. Once again, this is to suggest that the referents of the pictorial texts are not stable (there are also potential meanings concerning the geometric, as the title indicates): meaning-effects are effects, rather than just meanings, because of this. And it is the processes of meaning-effects that provide relevant frames within which the activities of viewing can be identified and assessed. In this, Çoker's work keeps repeating modes of address that shift only between the transcendentalist or "cosmic" and an impoverished sense of the body as a sort of container for visual experience. The insistent sense of a technical mastery would reject the very tensions concerning corporeality and action that so-called abstract expressionist painting brought to the fore in the first place.

Unlike Çoker, Uluç has shown a regard for this, and one way of understanding the achievement of his work is to have shifted attention from a fascination with, or repulsion from, the gestural potentially towards an understanding of the ways in which art may cite culture, including cultural discourses, and thereby communicate senses of space. The meaning-effects of such spaces may be such as to communicate the reach of dominant notions of the body in space, even while interweaving traces of the experience, though not the belonging to, of other cultural traditions. I am thinking, here, of the issue of the calligraphic, as I mentioned it earlier. For, I have come to sense

an insistent sense of the calligraphic as haunting Uluç's careful use of paint. Granted, his concern has been to communicate something of an experience of seeing—that "being overwhelmed" considered earlier. But this does not exclude being overwhelmed by calligraphy. As a Turkish artist, resistant to the reaches of dominant accounts of what is of value in modern, if not post-modern art, he has resisted simply being assigned a role as regional, provincial or marginal. And his work does not "reference" calligraphy. But, despite his interest in the classical zoographic tradition, as suggested by his remarks concerning his interest in the tensions between the Byzantine and the Ottoman in the fabric of Istanbul, the seriality of the sites of calligraphy, from the architectural to the manuscript, offers a modelling of the ways in which bodies have moved across the spaces of the Islamic policing of figuration, gestures that fold over on themselves in the production of letters as if in conformity with the ban on figuration.

Like Uluç's signature-effect of paint crossing over itself, in which a trace of gesture is obscured as if by "itself," the calligraphic would be that which hinted towards the calligrammatic, a resemblance of letters to beings and vice versa, while continuing to distribute traces of its signature-effect elsewhere. This history—not the rejection of Ottoman in the modern Turkish, but the re-imagining of possible continuities with the histories of places and spaces caught up in the Ottoman-Islamic empire—marks Uluç's work. Speaking of his relationship to cultural traditions, he said:

> . . . art is not only a consideration of culture or only enlivening a culture or settling relationships with ancient culture. . . . to make art is to take risks. (Henric 114)

It has been such a taking of risks that has enabled Uluç's work to emerge from within the paradigm of the gestural to raise questions about how experience, vision and culture may be related in contemporary Turkish contexts in ways that might promise a more, rather than less informed relation between pasts and futures.

Works Cited

Ash, John. "Afternoon with Nudes and Monsters." [translation of "Nüler ve Canavarlarla Bir Öğleden Sonra."] *Ömer Uluç: 1995-1996-1997.* Ed. Veysel Uğurlu. İstanbul: Yapı Kredi Kültür Sanat Yayıncılık, 1997. 7-23.

Crary, Jonathan. "Eclipse of the Spectacle." *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation.* Ed. Brian Wallis. Boston: Godine, 1984. 283-94.

Çaplı, Bülent and Hakan Tuncel. "Türkiye," *Avrupa'da Televizyon: Düzenleme, Politikalar ve Bağımsızlık.* Open Society Institute, EU Monitoring and Advocacy Program: Ankara, 2005. 193-259. [Also 'Turkey', *TV Across Europe: Regulation, Policy and Independence.* Open Society Institute, EU Monitoring and Advocacy Program: Budapest, 2005. 1539-99.]

Derrida, Jacques. "The Colossal." *The Truth in Painting.* Trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Ian McLeod, Chicago: Chicago UP, 1987. 119-47.

---. "The Spatial Arts: An Interview with Jacques Derrida." Eds. Peter Brunette and David Wills. *Deconstruction and the Visual Arts:* Art, Media, Architecture. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994. 9-32.

Erdoğan, Nezih. "Narratives of Resistance: National Identity and Ambivalence in the Turkish Melodrama between 1965 and 1975." *Screen* 39.3 (1998): 259-71.

Henric, Jacques. "Ömer Uluç." Galeri Nev, *Ömer Uluç,* İstanbul: Galeri Nev, 1989. 110-118.

Hopkins, David. *After Modern Art 1945-2000.* Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 2000.

Iversen, Margaret. "Saussure v. Peirce: Models for a Semiotics of Visual Art." Borzello, Frances and A. L. Rees, *The New Art History.* London: Camden Press, 1988. 82-94.

Kristeva, Julia. "Jackson Pollock's Milky Way: 1912-1956." *Journal of Philosophy and the Visual Arts* (1989): 35-9.

Steigler, Bernard. "The Time of Cinema: On the 'New World' and the 'Cultural Exception.'" *Tekhnema* 4 (1998): 62-112.

---. "The Discrete Image." Derrida, Jacques and Bernard Steigler. *Echographies of Television: Filmed Interviews.* Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002. 145-63.

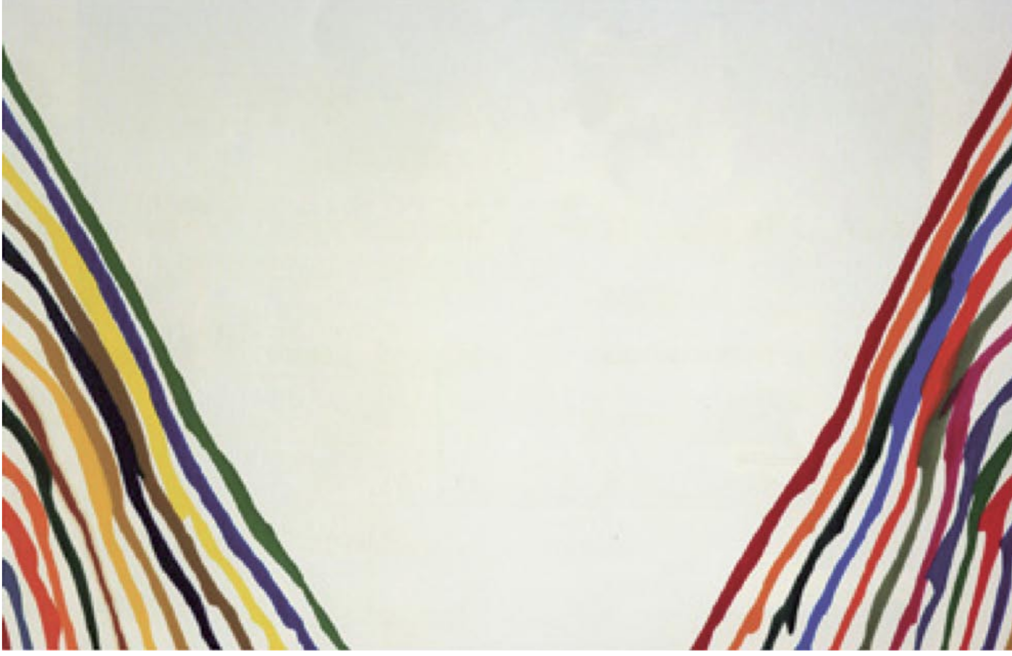
Steinberg, Leo. "Other Criteria." *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth Century Art.* London: Oxford UP, 1972. 55-91.

Tansuğ, Sezer. "A Logic of Progress." Galeri Nev, *Ömer Uluç,* İstanbul: Galeri Nev, 1989. 22-7.

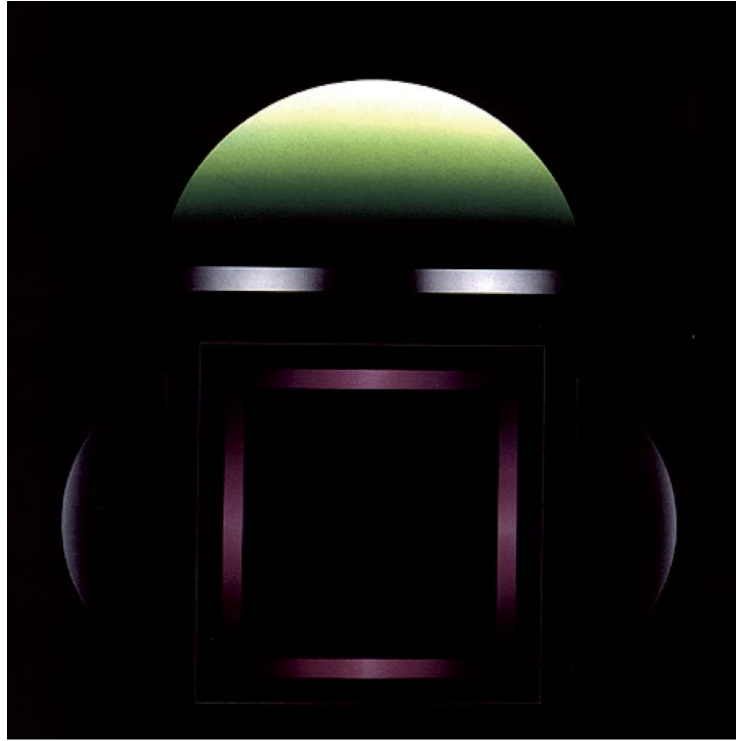
List of illustrations

1. Ömer Uluç, *Köpekli Aile* [*Family with Pet*], acrylic on canvas, 130 x 200 cm, Rafi Portakal Kolleksiyonu, 1996.

2. Jackson Pollock, *No. 1A,* oil and enamel on unprimed canvas, 172.7 x 264.2 cm, MOMA New York, 1948.



3. Morris Louis, *Beta Lambda*, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 262.6 x 407 cm, MOMA New York.



4. Adnan Çoker, *Yarım Küreler ve Mor Kare* [*Half Spheres and Purple Square*], acrylic on canvas, 180 x 180 cm, Ayal Sevant Koleksiyonu.