

DE•MONSTRA•TION: The Monster and the Demonization of Other

by

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Abstract

In this dissertation paper I aim to put in words what I artistically express in my thesis exhibition *de-monstra-tion*. The exhibition includes paintings, drawings and an installation imitating the national elections atmosphere in Turkey. It offers an artistic response to aggression and violence in different forms prevalent throughout the world. It does this by “demonstrating” how we can artistically criticize cruelties through re-politicizing politics in a manner as to neutralize all kinds of moral degradation associated with the demonization of other. I consider different connotations of the monster as expressed and elaborated in the literature to discuss how I use it as an artistic tool to humorously subvert moralized politics dominant in society and media. Then, I build my exhibition on neo-expressionism and graffiti with particular emphases on the works of Spero, Basquiat and Haring. Finally, I elaborate on how in my exhibition I used Artaud’s theatre of cruelty to re-politicize politics against the moralization of politics.

Keywords: Turkey, monster, neo-expressionism, graffiti, media and politics

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“It’s the terror of knowing what this world is about...”

In loving memory of David Bowie...

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INTRODUCTION
THE MONSTER AND I
OR
HOW I MET MY MONSTER

When I started this project almost a year ago, my objective was to challenge deeply-held cultural biases prevailing in our contemporary societies by problematizing discrimination practices against minorities of different kinds in today's societies. At the end of my research, I thought I would come up with an expressive artistic position and a corresponding style and technique that would be reflective of disturbing political tensions deriving from cultural divisions in society. During my research process, the focus of my interest began to shift, so much so that there emerged wide discrepancies between my thesis proposal and the evolving work. My research has dramatically drifted from cultural divisions to the nature of politics in contemporary societies, and especially in Turkey. I came to realize that aggression and violence in different forms is prevalent throughout the world and Turkish society are the result of a particular kind of politics, which involves discrediting one's political opponents in the most moralistic manner.

In backing up my argument I draw from my personal experiences in the Turkish political context. To me, almost all Turkish political parties seem to vie for power over their rivals by framing them as immoral forces. They do not abstain from labeling their opponents as 'evil' while calling themselves 'good' by contrast.

My thesis work *de-monstra-tion* offers an artistic counter to this kind of moralization of politics, and aims to subvert it by eliminating the moralistic references used in political rhetoric. In other words, I try to neutralize all kinds of moral degradation associated with the

demonization of other as a political strategy and tactic. I use the monster as a metaphor for the human species, which I think renders a non-monstrous human being an impossibility. In this sense, I suggest that the monster metaphor makes the demonizer and the demonized equally good and bad at the same time. The political implication of erasing the moral differentiation among people by turning all of them into monsters is not difficult to see. In a monster society all politically organized groups have an equal chance of being demonized, thus morality is excluded from politics by default, and has thereby lost its capacity to exclude outsiders or minorities who do not share the core values of society.

In my thesis work I wanted to simulate a public space that Istanbulians experience in the streets during elections. I decided to produce and install rows of multiple flags on which monsters of different kinds are printed so that all my viewers can witness the frantic political atmosphere that establishes a heavy sway over the whole city for months on end. Considering the orientation of my work with regard to the subversion of morally framed dichotomies and divisions mostly responsible for various forms of alienation and demonization throughout society, illustrating political parties as monsters occurred to me as a very promising idea to work on.

In Turkey elections always take place on a powder keg behind the façade of a carnival like atmosphere. Political parties carefully festoon each and every street in almost every residential area with their glowing flags in a frantic race to win over the voters. Party leaders appear to be like thunder on the make-shift election speech stages; TV channels and dailies meticulously cover the elections to reflect the feelings and tendencies in the squares. Nevertheless, beneath this seemingly peaceful outer shell are two kinds of identity based binary oppositions - over and above the modern ideologies of left and right that may be seen

elsewhere – which may lead to violence in no time. These are the Secularist versus Islamist and the Turkish versus Kurdish binary oppositions that have divided the citizens in terms of “us” and “them” identifications since the first days of the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923.¹ For those people who are fanatically enrolled in these particular binary oppositions, individuals belonging to the category of “them” appear to be not only inferior beings, but also the archenemies that must be completely wiped out. In other words, they act like reactionaries who do not see the other as political rivals in a democratic race but rather *monsters* to be destroyed.

Beginning with the Gezi Revolt in 2013, Turkey entered a violent milieu. I was a firsthand witness to the dramatic events. During the month-long street *demonstrations* in June of that year, several young people were killed by the security forces, which were directly commanded by the then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Erdoğan’s “moderate” Islamist AKP (Justice and Development Party) came to power in 2002 in the midst of social and economic crisis with lofty promises for democratization and prosperity. Almost a decade later, the political, social and economic developments which ensued from the neoliberal policies of the AKP had nonetheless resulted in a dreadfully unpromising panorama. Indeed, the Gezi Revolt was largely a popular uprising to voice the anger of secular individuals and groups at Erdoğan’s increasingly authoritarian determination to impose his Islamist views through corruption, alcohol restrictions, rants against abortion, or the censorship of the arts and the media that would be seen only in totalitarian regimes.²

¹ Ahmet Öncü, “Dictatorship Plus Hegemony: A Gramscian Analysis of Turkish State,” *Science*

² Ahmet Öncü, “Turkish Capitalist Modernity and the Gezi Revolt,” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 27, 2 (2014): 151-152.

In 2015 Erdoğan became the first ever elected president of the country and started an all-out war against the parliamentary system to establish an authoritarian regime. Effectively controlling the justice system, the security forces and media, in March 2016 he finally set out on a witch hunt campaign against academics who had signed a petition to the Turkish government begging an end to the violence in southeastern Turkey.³ As I am writing these lines, criminal investigations against the signatories are still going on, while Ankara, the capital, is declared in the international media as one of the most insecure cities in the world due to the deadly terror-related explosions in the last five months. Erdogan and the government seem to be determined to continue with repression and the brutal use of security forces against all sorts of democratic opposition. What is more, they mysteriously remain silent against the appalling statements that are regularly disseminated by the AKP-controlled media. To just give a feeling of what I mean by appalling statements, I quote the following words of one of the AKP thugs who declared his full support for Erdogan and his cruel crackdown on his political rivals through a press release, which has reverberated in the international media around the world: “We will spill your blood in streams and we will shower in your blood.”⁴

I was born into a Turkish family in Canada where I spent the first six years of my life, but a major part of my childhood and adult life I lived in Turkey. Because of my dual

³ “Why Turkey’s government is threatening academic freedom,” *The Washington Post*, accessed March 21, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/01/16/why-turkeys-growing-anti-intellectualism-is-a-threat-to-academic-freedom/>.

⁴ “Turkish PM denounces academics calling for end to violence in southeast, urges them to condemn PKK,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, accessed March 21, 2016, <http://www.hurriyetaidailynews.com/turkish-pm-denounces-academics-calling-for-end-to-violence-in-southeast-urges-them-to-condemn-pkk.aspx?pageID=238&nID=93846&NewsCatID=338>.

identity, I have occupied an outsider position, whether I was in Canada or Turkey, i.e. a Turk in Canada and a Canadian in Turkey. I always felt suspended between my two identities. As my awareness of the social and cultural differences between Canada and Turkey has grown, I have come to recognize the importance of politics in the evolution of societies. Therefore, as a young artist, I felt the urge to produce art that would help bring change to the world and people, to touch them in one way or another. I have been fascinated with political artworks, primarily because I have considered politics omnipresent – something inseparable from life itself - and an essential tool that makes people think. However, I never wanted to shape or mold the beliefs of people. I only longed to reach them and make them reflect on various alternatives and possibilities that might have changed their unquestioned assumptions and prejudices. Nevertheless, I have also seen politics as a very precarious field of action with respect to “changing the world”, so much so that if not played warily, it might do harm rather than help. In this sense, the political position that I assume in my artworks resonates with Haring’s views on the limited capacity of a single individual or artist to change the world:

I don’t believe that people can really change things. I mean, I think you can effect little changes in people’s lives on a day-to-day, minute-to-minute basis, but as far as real big changes, I think they are governed by other things ... How much their kid enjoys wearing a t-shirt – it’s the only shirt they want to wear. The other things are in other people’s hands, especially in the manipulative world that we live in now with a bozo (a stupid person) actor as president I don’t have much

hope for change like that, because the people who are controlling things know exactly how to do it, and there are not many people who can see through it.⁵

Perhaps because of my pessimism about “big changes,” my political position has always triggered me into being witty, ironic and mocking in reacting to certain issues. I wanted my works to have the same quality. In “*de-monstra-tion*” I try to do this by teasing the Turkish elections through turning political parties into monsters enrolled in a meaningless competition. Those who vote for them (i.e. my viewers) do not know what they are politically supporting or backing. They just select from among a set of monsters the one that they may like most or feel closest to (Figure 1). This whole experience imitates the actual attitude of the actual voter. He/she often casts his/her vote according to his/her liking or disliking on the basis of some moral considerations without thinking of the political implications of his/her choice. In other words, they are not making a political but a moral choice. As I will emphasize later in connection with Debord’s notion of the “society of spectacle,” here I humorously subvert the deceiving, or rather propagandistic images strategically placed in the public sphere or the media by turning them into deceiving images. In a way, as Debord says, I deceive the deceiver by joining the political spectacle as an artist.

I have always looked to express my political position thus defined as subtly as possible by avoiding being offensive. That has never meant repressing my convictions and desires in order not to upset people, but just watching out for the cunning nuance that an artist should always try to be alert to, that is, concealing what he/she thinks is right or wrong, good or evil, so that his/her art might elude the imposition of truth - the latter stems from the fact that art is not about reality but expressions of it. Moreover, given the ever-increasing

⁵ Peter Belsito, *Notes from the Pop Underground*, (Berkeley: The Last Gasp of San Francisco, 1985), 107.

restrictions and repressions on the freedom of expression in Turkey, a bluntly explicit critical art would also lead to criminalization and even incarceration. In other words, vaguely expressing my ideas in my works was also rational or tactically sounder.

I truly felt the fear of criminalization during the production of my monster flags. In order to build a satirical dimension into my work, I decided to have my monster flags printed in Turkey by a printing company that actually produces party flags for elections. This choice proved to be a real challenge, though. My parents and friends warned me that this would be a highly risky venture. What if, they all said, somebody in the printing company gets offended when he/she sees that you are ridiculing the banners of actual parties through representing them as monster party flags? This possible reaction might have had serious consequences if it had been about the party banner of Erdogan's AKP - given that Erdogan has shown time and again that he has zero tolerance for humor. My father's solution to the problem added not only a new satirical dimension but also a political one to the evolving work. He contacted his friends from the Turkish Communist Party to ask a party flag printing company that would appreciate the artistic nature of my intentions! So as a matter of fact, I bypassed this challenge by working with a company that I approached through my father's connections. Amusingly, I felt like I was involved in a clandestine political activity throughout this process!

My political position that I have explained above has evolved only over time. My first term in graduate studies at OCAD U was about self-exploration and experimentation for a politically oriented art. In my studio practice, I used one of the characters I had been drawing for some time and made a series of sketches of it. I loved the effortlessness, the freedom in creating an image without thinking and playing around with it. Soon, I came to realize that I had been trying to develop a way of creating images without pre-meditation. I call this style

“drawing through free associations” after Freud’s psychoanalytical technique, which is expected to liberate the subconscious from repressions. Before that, I would usually plan what I painted; contemplate for days on finding a line of attack to create a distinctive image or project. I was thinking too much, which would awfully hinder my productivity. Once I broke free from the shackles of my mind, so to speak, I not only enjoyed drawing more, but also became more productive. I started looking into my early childhood paintings as sources of inspiration. I was actually amazed to notice how much I could learn from my own childhood imagination, which was more or less free of convoluted repressions. In other words, I turned to my own childhood drawings to dig up the primitivism of my personal upbringing.

All this was happening in my second year of being away from Istanbul – i.e. my home. During those days, following the horrifying news about oppression at home via the web, and comparing it with the ordinary daily news broadcast in the Canadian media, I felt hopeless and helpless. I have been brought up in a community that not only treated me as an individual who is free to choose her own life style, but also encouraged me to live by protecting and expressing my personal views and desires. My lifestyle in Istanbul was not any different from that in Toronto. I have never felt the social pressure, let alone the political repression, emanating from the Islamist ideology, but so was “my” Istanbul to a certain extent, before the authoritarian Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his “moderate” Islamist AKP government came to power when I was around the age of 12. Ever since, I have witnessed the steadily deteriorating political and cultural conditions in my home, which, as I briefly mentioned earlier, ultimately turned into a dreadful place where people are not only divided but also incriminated by their leader in terms of their lifestyle, beliefs, religions,

gender and ethnicity; a leader who speaks only for the Sunni Muslims - the majority which have voted for him - and disregards the rest, i.e. the minorities, to one of which I happen to belong. In the face of such a suffocating political and cultural milieu, the disappointment and the anguish that I had from within had grown, I felt the need to express these feelings through my art.

After watching a video on social media filled with loaded insults and ignorant comments about two people hugging on the street, and indiscriminately framing this as a bad thing, there I found myself standing in front of the canvas with a brush and black paint. I started tracing an outline of two interlocking heads. Having an image of Brancusi's "The Kiss" in the back of my mind, my strokes naturally created a scene with the heads twisted into a hugging couple with one arm wrapping around them tightly, surrounded by green, blue, yellow, and pink monsters, who were trying to separate them, whilst simultaneously turning them into a monster or a demonized other. As I stood back and viewed it, I realized I had finally found my style flowing from my art. It felt free; it felt expressive; it felt refined; and more importantly it was just speaking to me. I knew this was all me. The monster was my key to expression. With this new discovery I produced many paintings with intense expression and heavy layering of color. I searched for artists who have been using similar methods and techniques. I observed that my work shared similar or common elements with graffiti and neo-expressionism (Figure 2).

Initially, I focused mostly on the works of two prominent neo-expressionists, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring. I carefully studied their biographies, artistic styles and political messages and tried to develop my own work in a dialogue with theirs. Two features of their identities drew me close to them. First of all, both of them were considered outsiders,

just like me. Basquiat was an ‘uneducated’ black artist within a white dominant America. Haring, a college dropout, occupied an even more problematic social position. He was an overtly gay artist in a mostly homophobic cultural milieu. Secondly, as I like to accomplish in my works, both used subtle political messages in their paintings and drawings. It was not clear to see in their works what kind of social and political critiques they wanted to convey. This was more valid for Basquiat than Haring. The latter, especially in his criticism of the consumerist culture, took on an unambiguous political stand that was pro-life, pro-human and more towards the opposing “good against evil.”⁶

Nancy Spero, more than any other artist, has had the greatest effect on me. Not only her style, but also her personality and outlook as a female artist helped me expand what I previously was, and showed me who I would be if I, as a woman, persisted in the face of being treated as nobody. Despite the obstacles of male-dominated mainstream debates and institutional evaluations of artistic production in the sixties and seventies, Spero was determined to become a widely accepted artist; and for more than a decade she worked away, patiently developing a critical feminist art genre against the pervasiveness of terror, war and abuse of power, until at last her perseverance was crowned with success. Her creation of gruesome heads in the midst of the Vietnam War and the struggles of the Civil Rights Movement were artistic reactions to the horrific images of the war and the racial violence in the streets broadcast nightly on television. Spero thus inspired me as to how I would turn my daily experiences, shaped by the manifold news images endlessly flowing from various media, into artistic works. I gained a whole new perspective about political art by studying

⁶ Belsito, *Notes from the Pop Underground*, 107.

her hard-earned recognition for her condensed imagery and methodology, which guided her to produce:

manifestoes against a senseless obscene war, a war [her] sons could have been called up for, though they were very young ... These works were exorcisms to keep the war away. It's a kind of exorcism ...⁷

As her lifelong friend, colleague and husband, Leon Golub emphasized about Spero's painted images of war, "her works were spontaneous and casual, ... , harking back to street art, graffiti, burlesque, the carnival, the dance of death."⁸ She was an artist against cruelty by cruelty. Later in this thesis essay I will try to show that this is also what I aim to accomplish in my show *de-monstra-tion*.

In the remainder of this thesis paper I try to contextualize my art practice with respect to my personal experience of certain individuals within the circle of my close friends and their unbridled tendency to demonize others in Istanbul in the aftermath of Erdogan's rise to power. Following this, I turn to different connotations of monster as expressed and elaborated in the literature to discuss how I use it in my works to create a critical political response to dichotomous thinking. Then, I switch to my thesis show *de-monstra-tion* and show how I build it on neo-expressionism and graffiti with particular emphases on the works of Spero, Basquiat and Haring. Here, in connection with election flags part of my show I elaborate on how I appropriate Artaud's "theatre of cruelty" as a political art response to violence,

⁷ Deborah Frizzell and Nancy Spero, "Nancy Spero's War: Maypole/Take No Prisoners," *Cultural Politics*, May 20, 2009, accessed March 21, 2016, <http://newsgrist.typepad.com/culturalpolitics/2009/05/nancy-speros-war-maypoletake-no-prisoners.html>.

⁸ Ibid.

aggression and discrimination perpetrated on powerless individuals and groups in society by reactionary forces that often legitimize their brutality with reference to hate discourses.

Finally, in conclusion, I evaluate my studio process, my discoveries and trajectories, my sources of inspiration, and more importantly the works included in *de-monstra-tion*. By doing so, I aim not only to position my creations within art theory and practice, but also to *demonstrate* how my monsters can actually be interpreted as certain statements of a particular political response to what I described as the demonization of other. Here, after drawing some lessons from my experiences and efforts during this extended process, I indicate the new directions that my art practice may take in the future.

MY PERSONAL ENCOUNTERS WITH ALTERITY

My earliest memory about otherness goes back to my early childhood years in Edmonton in the beginning of the 1990s. In a town house complex run by the University of Alberta, I lived together with girls and boys who looked somewhat different from us – i.e., my parents and myself. Some of my friends had different skin colors or shades, different dresses; some enjoyed different foods; some celebrated different feasts; and some even worshipped different gods. My best friends were a curious brown girl, a chatty blond girl, and a cheerful almond eye boy. Besides our gang of four there were lots of other girls and boys who were always eager to connect with one another and with us. There was an unending fight over who was going to “make friends” with whom. Although today I cannot precisely recall the specific motives that had induced us to “make friends” with certain kids and not others, none of those had anything to do with a wish to connect to somebody with particular physical

or social features. Had somebody wondered who actually made friends with whom, she could have observed the proliferating squads of “monsters” vying for treats on Halloween Day.

We moved to Turkey, the homeland of my parents, upon my father’s completion of his graduate studies in 1996. I was just six years old. After two years in the capital city, Ankara, we relocated to Istanbul, the trade and cultural capital of the country. This gigantic, transcontinental metropolis in Eurasia, historically also known as Byzantium and Constantinople, with its hustle and bustle and maze-like landscape appeared to me a wonderland full of treasures awaiting discovery.

This was a city not only connecting Asia to Europe but also communities of Judaic, Christian and Muslim people to one another in a seemingly peaceful environment. I had many Muslim friends –naturally so, because Islam is the religion of majority. As a person born into a Muslim family, I also “made friends” with many Jewish and Christian girls and boys. Thus, vis-à-vis my early childhood experiences in Edmonton, I had not undergone any serious cultural shock concerning how I was going to choose my friends. The latter were all different in terms of one criterion or another, but all equally likeable and desirable. What is more, even if we had ever noticed them, we would not have cared at all about our differences.

As I have grown older, I have poignantly come to recognize how naïve and innocent we were as kids in being blind to our cultural or other differences, whether we were in Istanbul or in Edmonton. My personal discovery of our naïveté was truly an eye opening one. In one of the days of Ramadan, I was overtly discriminated against by my friends because I did not fast. These were the very same friends who used not to care about what or who we were other than being just friends. But now, in the twenty-first century, in which “we” have

been revitalizing our Islamic heritage, they have developed a highly-flavored taste and inclination towards living “like a Muslim.” Not only that! They also wanted me to live “like a Muslim” in order to be a good person.

Disturbed by the peer pressure, I consulted my parents to get help about how I should manage my relations with my loud-mouthed friends. For my mom and dad, there was nothing to be worried about. In a secular democratic country such as Turkey, everybody had the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. Moreover, this right included freedom not to live in congruity with the demands of one’s religion. My early adulthood overlapping the tumultuous last years of the second half of the first decade of the new millennium convinced me that my parents had entirely failed in their assessment of the discriminatorily divisive morally driven political order that my generation has found itself facing, not only as the new reality, but also as the political challenge of the current epoch.

Without having fully figured out whether we have been in a political or a moral struggle in Turkey, I returned to Canada - this time to Toronto - for my graduate studies. It did not take too long to find out that a kind of discriminatorily divisive political order had also been successfully constructed in this country, i.e., my other homeland. Here, too, people were speaking about racism, sexism and ethnocentrism as practices of discrimination in politics and society. But what was the discriminatorily divisive, morally-driven political order? How was it constructed? How did it differ from a political order that aims at inclusivity, fairness, and tolerance? Moreover, what could an artist do to resist dichotomies, conflicts and fanatical hostilities arising from the morally driven political order? I kept asking such questions throughout my MFA studies at OCAD U, which influenced not only my

inspirations in my studio practice but also my research, taking me all the way through to this thesis work.

THE MONSTER

I have already told in the introduction how I met “my monster” as an artistic metaphor in my quest for my own art. To reiterate, it just came to me as a natural response after watching a video on social media, filled with loaded insults and ignorant comments about two people hugging on the street. Having been angered by this cruelty, I could not help painting a scene, in the most primitive expression, in which the heads of two individuals were twisted into a hugging couple with one arm wrapping around them tightly, surrounded by green, blue, yellow, and pink monsters, who were trying to separate them whilst simultaneously turning them into a monster or a demonized other (Figure 3). But what was a monster? What I eventually discovered in and through my art was that everybody was a monster of some sort.

The entry *monster* in *The New Webster Dictionary* reads as follows: ‘A plant or animal of abnormal structure or greatly different from the usual type; an animal exhibiting malformation in important parts; a person looked upon with horror on account of extraordinary crimes, deformity, or power to do harm; an imaginary creature, such as the sphinx, mermaid, etc.’ ‘Monster’ entered English in late medieval times from the old French term *monstre*, which in its turn originated from the Latin root *monstrum*.⁹ The Latin word is derived from the root of *monere*, which means ‘to warn.’ Related to this primary meaning, *monere* is thought to be also referring to ‘that which teaches’ or ‘that which instructs.’ The

⁹ Stephen T Asma, *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 13.

latter connotation forms the basis of the current English word *demonstrate*, which is used interchangeably with ‘to point out, indicate, show or prove.’

These etymological references takes us back to the pagan world, and how they depicted monsters in their legends and myths. In their polytheistic worlds, monsters, as key characters along with gods, establish connections between the manifest and the latent; the beyond and the existing; the world of the spirits and the world of humans.¹⁰ The most common image of a monster was the serpent, which represents the two qualities of soul, namely good and evil, and enters the plot either as a soothsayer or a venerated enemy to instruct those who are curious about the essence of the cosmos and the place of themselves and their group within it.

During my independent study term in Istanbul in the summer of 2015, I found out that the serpent monster is still used in the artefacts of popular culture in Turkey. In addition to reading on the history of the serpent symbol, I also talked to some local traditional artists about the meanings attached to this grotesque figure. All I heard was that it symbolized the power of life stemming from both good and bad forces at the same time (Figure 4).

In today’s societies the meaning attached to monsters radically shifted away from this pagan perspective. For Asma, “the word is [now] so charged with prejudicial values that it can never again be used in an objective or purely descriptive manner.”¹¹ Today the term monster takes on a moral connotation rather than a descriptive reference to what it means to be human. This explains why many people today more often than not associate the term not only with horrible looking beasts that may cause fear or do harm by their appearance or

¹⁰ Gwendolyn Leick, *A Dictionary of Ancient Near Eastern Mythology*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), passim.

¹¹ Asma, *On Monsters*, 15.

actions, but also immoral conduct. In this sense the widespread fascination with the idea of monstrosity in contemporary films, theatre, literature, and painting and sculpture indicates that these days we are essentially curious about how some of us may perpetrate unintelligible hideous acts beyond the moral order of society. As Rifka explains succinctly, “We describe a thing as monstrous when we refuse to accept it as a part of being human such as blood lust or sexual perversion; defining something as monstrous offers us a vent for the repressed emotions and drives we seek to banish from conscious thought and relegate them to the category of alien.”¹² Rifka adds that ‘the powerful attraction monsters hold over us derives from the way they help us to escape our worst fears, which are always, overwhelmingly, of ourselves.’

My discovery of the disparity between the pagan monster and the one we see in popular culture today helped me clarify how I adopt this variously interpreted notion in my own works. The question that I had to tackle was whether I approach it from a neutral standpoint like pagans or impose a negative meaning on it like we see in popular culture and art today. The more I reflected on my works and how I felt when I was producing my monsters, the more I felt convinced that I had a monster symbol in my mind similar, if not identical, to the pagan one.

As pagans do, I see the monster as representative of the human individual more than any other metaphor used to signify him/her in today’s popular culture. By using the monster as the metaphor for the human species, I want to emphasize that the human individual is also an animal, in addition to being a unique species with the ability to make moral judgments.

The monster captures this dual quality of the human individual in that it symbolizes a creature

¹² ““Judy Rifka Posted” at Art6 Gallery,” by Andrea Scrima, *Judy Rifka Overview*, accessed March 21, 2016, <http://www.judyrifka.com/>.

whose “animus”, i.e. the motivation to do something, is activated both by instincts - as animals - and consciousness – which we exclusively emphasize as a distinguishing human trait. Thus the monster metaphor *neutralizes* all kinds of moral degradation associated with moral misconduct, because it eliminates the possibility of a *non-animal* human being in the first place. As we can expect from an animal, each and every one of us can act viciously if we instinctively feel insecure or uncomfortable. To put it differently, this particular metaphor renders both the demonizer and the demonized equally bad and good at the same time, eliminating the basis for moral and other kinds of hierarchies between them.

In taking on this particular position regarding how I see the monster in my works, Cohen’s “monster theory” was very helpful.¹³ Cohen provides a series of theses on the concept of the monster which, taken as a whole, deconstruct the notion of “we” that is routinely used to refer to humanity in the abstract. What gives his theory an edge over the latter is that he builds his framework in relation to the monster’s body and what this metaphorically stands for. Cohen conceives the monster “as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment - of a time, a feeling, and a place.”¹⁴ As a manifestation of a set of certain cultural codes, “The monster’s body . . . incorporates fear, desire, anxiety and fantasy . . . , giving them life and uncanny independence.”¹⁵ In this sense, the monster is, first and foremost, the mirror into which we look to see our unconscious. We can thus read the monster’s body as if we are reading our dreams, which are, although sometimes wonderful, often cruel.

¹³ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

All this leads me to ask my viewers to be particularly wary when they want to decipher the messages given by the devilish-looking monsters in my works. Through Plato's myth of the cave in *the Republic*, I may allegorically clarify what I try to signify with my monsters. Plato tells us the story of a group of prisoners who have been incarcerated in an underground cave dwelling since birth.¹⁶ These prisoners, never being outside, are shackled so that they cannot face either side or behind them, but only straight ahead. Behind them is a fire, and behind the fire is a wall. Mounted on the wall are several effigies that some puppeteers hold up to the firelight in a way to cast their shadows. The prisoners watch the acts that these shadows seem to perform, and because these shadows are all they can look at, they take them for reality. For Plato, only those who can escape from the cave may prevail over the confusion of shadows with reality. Similar to Plato's allegory, I think of society as the cave within which we can only see the shadows of individuals and their performances. My works attempt to allude to the outside of the cave, or the outside of regular society. And I do this by drawing the individuals that I see in regular society as monsters, who are meant to be reflective of individuals held captive in the cave.

Once we see the human individual as a monster stuck in a cave where everything appears to be an image- i.e. the society that we live in, as well as the one that is represented for us in the media - the world that we see around us becomes what Debord calls "a society of the spectacle." This is a world where we live only by looking at images that are detached from their exact instances of occurrence. In other words, we have only fragmented views of reality that are rearranged into new ones as a separate "pseudo-world." As Debord puts it, here "the specialization of images of the world evolves into a world of autonomised images

¹⁶ Plato, *The Republic*, edited by G. R. F. Ferrari, translated by Tom Griffith, (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 220.

where even the deceivers are deceived.”¹⁷ Take, for example, my work *de-monstra-tion* (Figure 5). As part of it, it regroups the images of Turkish elections looked at in the streets of Istanbul and the media. All those propaganda materials that are put in strategically selected places are there to deceive the spectators. In this sense, what I try to do can be considered deceiving the deceiver without claiming that I show my spectators the reality. I just join the spectacle with a view to raising a humorous critical sense about the deceptive nature of our daily encounters. Because of this, in my works, unlike in regular society or the media, the true-versus-false opposition melts into air, in that everything is true and false at the same time. All the propagandistic messages in the news of broadcast media or in the images of political banners or flags lose their relevance. In this context, I see the monster as not only the personification of repressions registered in the unconscious, but also their liberation from it. In other words, the monster exactly appears to me to be what Artaud, in his very last poem *To Have Done with the Judgment of God*, imaginatively thinks of as “the body without organs”, or the body set free:

When you will have made him a body without organs,
then you will have delivered him from all his automatic reactions
and restored him to his true freedom¹⁸

Because the monster is liberated from all its repressions, it is not clear at all for us to define who or what it is. Thus, Cohen fittingly argues that “the monster always escapes because it refuses easy categorization,” which in turn renders it mysterious, if not cruel and dangerous at once.¹⁹ As Asma’s depiction of Adolf Eichmann, the Nazi architect of the

¹⁷ Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, (London, Rebel Press, 2004), 7.

¹⁸ “Body Without Organs,” *Wikipedia*, accessed, March 21, 2016.

¹⁹ Cohen, *Monster Theory*, 6.

Holocaust, shows us, the mystery surrounding the monster may reach such an extreme level that the monster may even refuse to be categorized as a monster.

Eichmann was not so much an anti-Semite as an unfeeling, detached career man looking for the most expeditious path to professional success. He lacked empathy, just like the psychopaths . . . Arendt points out that “it would have been very comforting indeed to believe that Eichmann was a monster,” but “the trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal.”²⁰

Sure enough, the monster of my works is a nuisance for those who prudently choose to act within and through the codes of the dominant organization of power, i.e. the regular society. Because the monster can always escape the rules that govern customary social relations, it “notoriously appears at times of crisis a kind of third term that problematizes the clash of extremes.” On one level it is part of the regular society, on another level, it dwells in a world beyond the one that a large number of people live in. Thus, the monster of my works resists any classification built on hierarchy or a merely binary opposition, demanding instead a “system” allowing polyphony, mixed response (difference in sameness, repulsion in attraction), and resistance to integration—allowing what Hogle has called with a wonderful pun “a deeper play of differences, a nonbinary polymorphism at the 'base' of human nature.”²¹

²⁰ Asma, *On Monster*, 244.

²¹ Cohen, *Monster Theory*, 7.

DE-MONSTRA-TION

As for my thesis show *de-monstra-tion* – as I have already mentioned in the introduction- I have been able to track down many helpful sources of inspiration that enrich and enhance my use of the monster metaphor. As a matter of fact, my choice of the monster as a metaphor for the human individual and his/her many actions and reactions has motivated me to study the works of artists associated with the currents of neo-expressionism and graffiti. The more I felt at ease with my monster choice, the more I became provoked to, so to speak, examine artists of these genres whose works could inspire me. Early on in my research, two legendary artists, who have produced startling works in their regrettably short lives, have conquered my mind and body. These were Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring, two American artists who left lasting impressions on the global art scene in the 1980s. I set my eyes on their use of symbolism, mythologies, narratives, spontaneity, rapidity, colorfulness and so many other ingenious touches. As I became familiar with their mind-set by reading their biographies, diaries and interviews, I came to grasp more and more what they wanted to express with what they produced. These two artists tried to communicate their own individual sensibilities and emotions through powerful, politically charged paintings. Not surprisingly, they reached many artists like myself around the globe and inspired them in their search to express their own joys as well as angst. I have truly adored the playfulness in their works and how this indeed concealed the political content that they were seeking to evoke. I also realized that this has been exactly what I have always wanted to achieve in my own works.

Haring's *Journal* has had an enormous influence on my artistic practice and how I come to describe it to myself. Reading his reflections on life, theory, art, politics, relations, and all that comes with being alive was like chatting with a soul mate. I remember taking his

Journal with me all the time wherever I happened to be going, just like a disciple carrying a sacred text in her bag. His frank and prickly writing style even motivated me to start a journal of my own. One of the first lines that I wrote in my journal was about his portrayal of painting: “In painting, words are present in the form of images. Paintings can be poems if they are read as words instead of images.”²² Haring was saying that paintings were collections of words. He further went on to declare that words are also imagery. So I gained a whole new perspective in making sense of words and imagery. I came to see them as implicated in one another as, for example, in Egyptian hieroglyphics and art. “Foreign languages, undeciphered alphabets,” wrote Haring, “can be beautiful, can express without a knowledge of the meaning of the words. Looking at a book printed in Chinese can be as beautiful as looking at pictures.”²³ This learning was so powerful on me that I decided to create a gibberish monster alphabet and started writing messages with it on my monster paintings (Figure 6). In my show *de-monstra-tion*, the monster party flags all have such messages written on them in different monster languages.

Haring was also influential on me in molding my understanding of the role and centrality of individuality in both life and art. Like many critical artists of his time, he was frustrated by consumerist society and its “anti-individual” stereotypes, rendering individuals “kinds of people” or “types of people” or “generalizations.”²⁴ For him “individuality is the enemy of this mass society,” reproduced through and through “by the media.” Therefore, defending individuality against “generalizations” requires being vigilant against the “anti-individual” representations of individuals in the media. “It is the lesson that must not be

²² Keith Haring, *Keith Haring Journals*, (New York: Penguin Classics Deluxe Edition, Penguin Classics, 2010), 13.

²³ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

ignored,” he wrote. Then he added: “It is what all art has been saying since the beginning of time.”²⁵ These lines empowered me to jealously protect my individuality against all those collective representations emanating from the social and cultural context surrounding me. Becoming skilled at trying to be an individual in an anti-individual context further motivated me to produce and share my works with others.

Haring’s contemporary and friend Basquiat has also had a powerful stimulus in the direction that I took in shaping my art practice. Basquiat was one of the leading artists of the 1980s, a decade that saw the rebirth of figurative painting, and the integration of street art and fine art. Basquiat was a pioneer in many regards, but one of his main feats was to challenge the widespread perception of graffiti as the art of “vandal, victim or unemployed youth.” As his works eventually came to be viewed as very lucid and highly sophisticated creations by some educated art critics, graffiti has taken on a high art status enabling many outsiders of the expensive art market to find themselves a unique niche. In Basquiat’s figurative paintings on canvases, one could see how his experience with graffiti surfaced in messages with multiple meanings, often relying on a bricolage of images, symbols, and words to discuss race, identity and politics.²⁶

Basquiat in his capacity as a street artist had also made many interventions into the lived environment of the city by drawing on walls and sidewalks. But he was not alone in taking the “educated” art to the street. Afterwards graffiti extended several important post-Pop and postmodern strategies that are now the common vocabulary of contemporary art, whether it is in the streets, galleries or digital environments. Photo-reproduction of street art

²⁵ Ibid., 15.

²⁶ Cynthia A Gadsden, *Art forum, Basquiat, and the 1980s*, (Master's thesis, College of Fine Arts of Ohio University, 2008), 33.

and dissemination of it via the web further blurred the boundaries of low and high art codes. If anything, Basquiat thus succeeded in bringing the outsiders into the mainstream art scene while remaining loyal to the freedom of the streets. Perhaps this was his real political statement against the *status quo*.

Not being familiar with these sources of inspiration behind my works, the reader may think of them as dark and depressing pieces, only portraying the cruelties of today's world. Moreover, the reader may imagine me as a pessimist, or worse a nihilist, who enjoys showing only the horribleness of our civilization as if it is doomed to burst asunder sooner rather than later. Yet I am neither a pessimist nor a nihilist. I am an artist trying as much as I can to turn the cruelties invading our lives into political issues by denying them moralistic representations. The monsters are there to neutralize bad and good, i.e. moralistic framing, as much as the colors with which I paint them (Figure 7). All is equal in my paintings. In this sense the highest value that guides me in my production is equality, which is, for all intentions and considerations, missing in our reactionary societies. I thus aim to challenge actual inequalities such as those of ethnicity, religion, gender and class by defusing them in the abstract through my art – more on this below with respect to my monster figures in my show *de-monstra-tion*.

I usually create my demonic figures by doodling, just out of boredom. Very much like a student who mindlessly scribbles figures in a class because of the tediousness of lectures, I draw my monsters by letting my subconscious flow in my notebook, canvas or tablet. The act of painting automatically by letting the hand govern the tool used to sketch, rather than the mind doing the calculation for the next step, creates a moment of abstraction from the concrete context. So when I set to “work”, I do not calculate what comes next; I do not step

back and envision which symbol or figure I will have to put in the emergent visual piece. Repetition of figures, symbols, lines and colors generate a parallel life, as it were. This is a moment such as one may experience in meditating in order to clear one's mind (Figure 8).

This sort of uncalculated style of painting is a long-acquired habit of mine. I am a product of popular culture as Haring describes himself as being. As he says, in 1958 he was born into "the space age", which had an enormous impact on all forms of popular culture including visual arts. Haring "grew up on TV" which, he thought, rendered him "a product of pop". In my case, being a "product of pop" was more valid than him.²⁷ I was born into the era of specialized pay-TV channels, in which established artistic techniques and styles had been mixed with emerging digital technologies. This was the new computer age where, as a kid, I could make sketches on my parents' Apple desktop for hours and hours by turning on the "Paint" application, while at the same time watching cartoons all day on TV channels like The Disney Channel, Cartoon Network or Nickelodeon. Cartoons were not only everywhere, but also accessible any time that a kid wished for. In such a visual cultural milieu it was hard to avoid the impact of cartoons on one's artistic inclinations.

This impact is very much visible in my digital drawings of monsters printed on my party flags. In these works, I carefully design my figures, making them very much similar to cartoons. However, in my paintings where the trace of the hand is more visible through the brushstroke, the cartoonish look is almost lost. Here, there is more of an automatic gesture gaining the upper hand in my production process. Figures become more abstract and expressive because of the presence of bodily performance.

²⁷ Jeanne Siegel, *Art Talk: The Early 80s*, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1988), 188.

Having said all this, I unquestionably have a subject matter to begin with. Sometimes I may have an image popping up in my head, but the final version of a painting never equals the image I have had in my mind. I always surprise myself from the beginning to the end. I never know what my production will look like. So I always take risks - meaning that I give a chance to spontaneity. But there is no failing in the end, because I do not care about failing, nor do I believe in it. In my paintings what was done was meant to be done. I never make sketches for what I will paint. They are manifestations of a moment. If I am inspired by an event in a news article or a broadcast video, I usually appropriate it as a source of inspiration, but never really copy and represent it as it has been shown, depicted or narrated in the media. This allows me to bring my own narration into the stories that are already framed for the viewer in line with the dominant perspectives in society.

I typically keep painting until the canvas gets entirely covered up in paint so that no negative space is left. By doing this, I am trying to simulate the logic of transgressions, appropriations, and tactics described in Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*. In De Certeau's account, people seem to be in an unceasing battle over their positions in the organization of power that constructs city space. He shows that "daily life is made, a creative production, constantly appropriating and reappropriating the products, messages, spaces for expression and territories of other."²⁸ In my works, the absence of negative space thus symbolizes both the absence of real space or territory in contemporary society and the ongoing fight for space among individuals and groups. Because of this, I usually place my figures in clusters as if they are squeezed up in a subway train during rush hour. This makes

²⁸ Martin Irvine, "The Work on the Street: Street Art and Visual Culture", accessed March 21, 2016, <http://faculty.georgetown.edu/irvinem/articles/Irvine-WorkontheStreet-1.pdf>.

the scene look exceedingly packed and chaotic. My paintings obviously reflect my predilection for chaos over order as a tool of expression in visual communication. I prefer creating chaotic narrations because I believe these make the viewer work harder to explore the particulars of figures or at least look and search for more details in the plot (Figure 9-10).

More recently I have started working with paper. One particular change in my style associated with this new experiment was about the choice of negative space in my paintings. I have developed a tendency to leave more negative space, perhaps because I had to paint with smaller brushes on a much smaller surface. I can say that painting on paper makes my production even quicker. My works on paper are akin to serialized online media reporting, more than the shooting of an event for the news that would be broadcast on TV. My paintings on large canvases are in tune with the spirit of the latter, in that they join together a flow of instances captured by my imagination into a single frame.

My subject matter is usually more general on canvas than paper. I more often than not illustrate violent scenes that may happen anytime in everyday life. Yet sometimes I draw portraits of monsters as if they are the key characters of a drama. I enjoy working more gently on monsters than other figures to make them differ from each other with respect to certain unique features. I like to see how monstrosity can vary from one character to another. At times I think of each of my monsters as a “beauty pageant” in competition with the others for grotesqueness. I nonetheless adore them all equally because they are all a part of me, of my imagination and creativity. Here I may sound like a cuckoo version of a Frankenstein-obsessed Mary Shelley, admiring her own creation, but it is true. These monsters are my

expressions, my way of perceiving the world, and I would like to share that world with others to make them see that we are all alike, yet at same time different in some respects.

To emphasize once again, my monsters are all equal to me. They are more or less raceless, genderless, classless, and nationless. They are neither positive nor negative, but both, i.e. figures reminding us “the nonbinary polymorphism at the 'base' of human nature.” They are free to the extent that they have the potential to do whatever their hearts *desire*. They are bodies without organs. They can override customary forms of behavior in no time. They can be brutal, yet at the same time gentle. Certainly, each of them has distinctive features springing from the peculiar position that they occupy in relation to the other monsters. In this sense, they are not any different from any one of us in real life. They gain their significance with respect to the social relations into which they are embedded. Therefore, each monster can also conveniently be considered unique. Nevertheless this does not change the fact that none of them is more special, more dangerous, scarier or more lovable than any other. None of them can essentially be favored over the others. Because of this, I never treat them as such, and expect them to be treated the same way by my viewers. My monsters must thus be interpreted and approached as statements about humanity held captive inside “the cave.”

In my canvas paintings I use primary colors heavily without mixing them. I first begin by layering a surface with red; once that dries I continue layering with white, and after that with black, purple, yellow, green, blue etc. etc. In the case of paper paintings, however, I prefer to mix colors instead of layering colors on top of each other. This gives me more pastel and monochrome tones. Sometimes I throw aside the brush and just squeeze the paint through

the tube and use it as if it were a pen. I could never think of quitting using black because it helps me outline my figures, and thus make it easier to see them more visibly.

My monsters on canvas are not painted in detail as compared to cartoon drawings that one can see in comic books. They are more like a hybrid of cartoon and abstract, more primitive in a sense than cartoons. Black plays an additional important role here because it removes abstractness to a certain extent, making the painting look semi-abstract. I have always heavily outlined figures in my paintings. During my undergraduate years at Sabancı University I was criticized by my professors because I depicted objects with heavy outlines, leaving no room for transition. One of my professors even told me that that was a sign of obsessive-compulsive behavior! I have my own ways of creating the transitions through images. I let the paint do that for me. I never do anything on purpose, including transitions.

I mostly paint with acrylic because it dries fast. I am not a patient person when it comes to painting. I want to pour my inner feelings onto canvas, paper or whatever and see the result as quick as possible. I do not like spending days and weeks on the same painting because I will most probably lose my interest in it. What needs to be done should be done immediately. Which is why I do not care for detail: detail is for people who are disciplined. I am not a disciplined person. Because of this perhaps, I can never work with oil paint, although I sometimes draw over with oil pastel and markers. I also like working on large scale canvases. This is because, I believe, the bigger the surface is the more it consumes you. I paint on non-stretched canvases. I either pin them or tape them to a wall rather than stapling them. I like exhibiting them this manner, too because it shows my viewers how I have created them in the first place.

During my studio work at OCAD U I have tried to expand my practice beyond painting and drawing. My first experimentation was to make a sculpture of a monster in the manner of an installation (Figure 11). I eventually ended up producing a wooden sculpture that I had made out of scrap wood left in the trash of woodshops. I gathered blocks of wood as much as possible without looking for particular shapes or sizes. Yet again, in this work as in my paintings, I did not know what the final work would look like. All I had were the wood blocks collected from trash. I did not have any clue about how I was going to attach them to one another. I did not have a plan. I laid them out scattered across the floor and began arranging them to form a shape so that it would resemble the monsters in my paintings. To my surprise it worked extremely well. This experience once again showed me that I could surprise myself if I listen to my inner voice. Although I liked the sculptural figure which emerged, it was nevertheless rather pale or colorless. Even though none of the wood pieces were identical in terms of color, they were all in tones of natural unfinished wood. I wanted some movement and warmth so I decided to paint it. I used red, black, or any other color for that matter. This made me realize that I can never do art without painting. My art is also about colors.

For my thesis show *de-monstra-tion*, by moving towards design I added tablet (iPad) digital painting dimension to my experimentations beyond the canvas, which has been an entirely new media of exploration, as well as a gratifying experience for me. I can designate this work simply as *monster election flags*, as it contains many monster figures printed on fabric in a manner in which political parties in Turkey have their party logos get reproduced as colorful election flags. As I have already explained in the introduction, this project was indeed a risky venture because of widespread intolerance toward humorous art in today's

Turkey. Nevertheless, through connections, I found a sensible printing company and had my flags printed on fabrics of various colors in almost exactly the same size as real party flags.

Last year witnessed many election campaigns and propaganda activities both in Turkey and Canada. The general elections in both of my homelands were conducted a month apart from each other. I actually had a chance to compare these elections because I was able to participate and vote in both. I have spent most of my life in Istanbul and cast my first vote when I was 18. Since then I have had several occasions to vote in Turkish elections for different mandates and levels of the government. Even though I have always tried to escape the irritating propaganda atmosphere, banners and flags of political parties have been all over on each and every main street of the entire country. So it was almost impossible not to be part of elections. I was surprised to see how in Canada there was a “less is more” kind of propaganda, as opposed to Turkey where you felt you were under attack by millions of flags on the streets (Figure 12). In Turkey the party with fewer flags was considered weak, unworthy, or politically fringe and vain. In other words the amount of ads, banners and flags hung around were seen as a sure sign of higher political status and chance in the competition for the office- or should I say monstrosity?

It was during those frantic days that I was also researching Nancy Spero’s works and came across the *Maypole* installation, and how she worked with nightmarish figurative painting in dialogue with space:

Maypole is very much a public sculpture that requires the space of the polis, the space of appearance and dialogue, activated by the viewer/citizen. It is as public an object as the medieval executioner's stakes on which the severed heads of the condemned

would fester and rot in rows on the civic square for all to witness.²⁹

For Spero, these “heads were stormy demons, disembodied, taunting and cursing with hyperbolic fury.” As she put into words:

In the early 1960s, I have these strange creatures, saying "merde" and "fuck you."

They're very angry images. These snake-like- or worm-like figures are a precursor of the War Series [1966-70]; they're screaming and their tongues are sticking out. I think the anger came from a feeling that I didn't have a voice. I didn't have an arena in which to conduct a dialogue. I felt like a nonperson, an artist without a voice.³⁰

My viewers may not fail to notice the parallels between Spero's *Maypole* and my *monster election flags* installation. Here, like Spero, I just wanted to simulate a public space that Istanbulians experience in the streets in Turkey during elections. The rows of multiple flags on which monsters of different kinds are printed are there inside the gallery for all my viewers to witness the frantic political atmosphere that establishes a heavy sway over the whole city.

As a matter of fact, upon entering the program I had already proposed that I wanted to expand my works towards installation to be able to immerse my viewers in my artwork, so that I could make a deeper impression on them. Working on the Turkish elections finally gave me the chance that I had been long looking for. The political parties participating in the elections seemed to me like “bodies without organs”, designed not only to brainwash people with false promises for a better future, but also act as insulting machines that are focused exclusively on discrediting the ideologies and policy proposals of other candidates in the most moralistic manner. I thought I would get at cruelty, at how members of morally agitated

²⁹ Frizzell and Spero, “Nancy Spero’s War”.

³⁰ Ibid.

parties posture, and so on. In order to simulate the election campaigns of these political parties I produced an animated GIF, which alludes to the TV ads used to brainwash people (Figure 13). I also prepared ballots so that my viewers would have a chance to actively participate in the monster elections and cast a vote. Eventually many of my viewers who visited my exhibition indeed cast a vote, rendering them a part of *de-monstra-tion*. The ballot booth and the ballot box that I put in the gallery along with party flags did provide my viewers with a chance to experience the election atmosphere as lived in Turkey (Figures 14-15-16).

In contextualizing the flags installation into an artistic position I may refer to Artaud's notion of theatre of cruelty. For Artaud, cruelty has two forms.³¹ The first form of cruelty is physical cruelty. This cruelty is a matter of aggression or slaughter in an absolute sense. This is the cruelty of political parties, who are responsible for the construction and reproduction of a moralized politics. The second form of cruelty is philosophical cruelty, which "signifies rigor, implacable intention and decision, irreversible and absolute determination."³² This is the cruelty which my monster flags aim to bring forth to re-politicize the politics taken hostage by moralistic outlooks.

As Leon Golub states when reflecting on Nancy Spero's work, elections in Turkey are "not a theater of the absurd, but the theater of reality", asking an artist to appropriate and show its cruelty.³³ This is actually what I hope I do with my *de-monstra-tion* in the spirit of Artaud's theatre of cruelty. Nancy Spero's own observations on the power and meaning of

³¹ Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 101.

³² Ibid.

³³ Frizzell and Spero, "Nancy Spero's War".

her own work not only encourage me about the aptness of my choice, but also impose on me a responsibility as an artist. So I should let Spero speak for me as well:

How violence is prevalent, not just in the United States but almost universally, in militaristic and para-militaristic terms. And that's not going to change either. Perhaps my work will be more easily acceptable because it will be possible to say "that's how it was in the twentieth century," . . . Dangerous futurology!³⁴

In the second decade of the twenty-first century one cannot help thinking how important Spero's witnessing as an artist is for all of us now – especially for those of us who have been experiencing morally motivated and backed political oppressions in Turkey.

Observing closely how the public is thrilled by the violent election spectacle, I thought that if I wanted to follow in the footsteps of Spero, I could use party banners to combine my artwork with my theory, and succeed in conveying my political message. I decided to make banners of various different parties run by monsters for some monster electorates. To this end, I chose to follow the whole process from the beginning to the end in the exact same way it was lived in Turkey's elections. In this way, I thought I would experience the election atmosphere first myself and then make my viewers undergo it if and when they are exposed to my work in the gallery. So I designed monster party logos by appropriating existing political party insignias (Figure 17). As I mentioned earlier, I wanted to get the logos printed on the flags in Turkey to make them more authentic in all senses.

I created my designs digitally, which is a medium I have never felt good with. I nonetheless keep motivating myself to learn the process and, with some failures and successes, in the end I have almost obtained what I had in my mind. Finally, I hung my

³⁴ Ibid.

monster banners on the ceiling of the gallery where I had my thesis work exhibition to see how they looked. It appeared to me as if in a monster society all monster parties seemed to have an equal chance of being demonized, because none of them were anything but monsters in the first place. So I thought I had really succeeded in defusing moralistic representations and politicizing ideological differences.

Perhaps, as a final note, I should briefly mention my ideas and intentions for future projects. I would like to repeat *de-monstrat-tion* in social and cultural contexts beyond Turkey to show the relevance of my work on the universal scale. I would like to reiterate the problem of the moralization of politics and how it can be artistically deconstructed in diverse contexts where demonization of other is done not along the religious divide as I took up here, but according to other dimensions of social status, such as gender, race, ethnicity or legal status (e.g. immigrant, disabled etc.). I also would like to take my work outside the gallery to make it visible in public spaces such as streets, walls or squares and continue making digital images while exploring new mediums (Figure 18).

CONCLUSION

The current Turkish political situation is undeniably taken over by what I call the moralization of politics. As I mentioned at the outset, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the president of Turkey, and the current government formed by his party, AKP, fully and effectively exploit the power and force bestowed in the tactic of moralistically demonizing their political challengers. They do this by pointing at them as if they are immoral evil forces responsible for suffering throughout society. Because of their control over state institutions and public as well as private media, Erdogan and his government effortlessly create a political milieu where

political competition over alternative policies are negotiated as if they are moral choices. As such, politics becomes a process of separating good from evil rather than what society sets to itself as objectives to be accomplished, according to the outcomes of a contentiously run political process. What my discussion indicates is that the latter requires established institutional as well as cultural buffers against the use of demonizing discourses in politics.

I created my show *de-monstra-tion* to ‘demonstrate’ how we can artistically subvert all kinds of moral degradation associated with the demonization of other. Using the monster as the metaphor for the human species gets rid of the possibility of demonization in the first place, rendering the demonizer and the demonized equally good and bad at the same time. And, because in a monster society all politically organized groups have an equal chance of being demonized, morality is excluded from politics by default, and has thereby lost its capacity to exclude outsiders or minorities who do not share the core values of society. My monster flags are thus statements about the re-politicization of politics in the age of moralized politics (Figure 19). My monsters, their parties and flags were all roaring in their monster languages demonstrating that Aristotle was right: “we are all political animals.”

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Appendix A: Figures and Images of Work



Figure 1. Tamara Skubovius casting a vote at the Ballot Box, 2016.



Figure 2. Huggers, 2014, acrylics and permanent ink marker on canvas, 75"x55".



Figure 3. Huggers vol.2, 2014, acrylics and permanent ink marker on canvas, 70"x55".



Figure 4. Study of Ouroboros the Serpent, 2015, acrylics on canvas, 55"x55", Istanbul (Independent Study).



Figure 5. Excerpts of “de-monstra-tion” at Gallery 50, 2016.



Figure 6. Details of Monster Party Logos, 2016, Digital paintings.



Figure 7. Untitled, 2016, Acrylics on canvas, 16.5 feet



Figure 8. Details of studio process. 2015.



Figure 9. Details of series of paper drawings. 2016.



Figure 10. Still from video, details of work process, 2016.



Figure 11. Hug Monster, Wood Sculpture, Installation, 2014.



Figure 12. Details of Turkish election flags, summer 2015. (Photograph taken during Independent Study in Istanbul)



Figure 13. Still from thesis show, GIF projected on gallery window, 2016



Figure 14. Voting Booth, 2016.



Figure 15. Viewers participating in voting, 2016.



Figure 16. Ballot Box, 2016.



Figure 17. Details of appropriated logos of Turkish political parties, 2016.



Figure 18. Election flags, Gallery 50, 2016.



Figure 19. Election Flags, Gallery 50, 2016.