

# Reconstruction of the past through artistic practices

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## Abstract

Artists express their past experiences through art practices and carry the personal and period dynamics of the past to the present through materials. Using of materials and the narrative potential and relationality of contemporary art practices provide spatial experiences. These practices bring past experiences to the present and allow viewers to re-experience. This study aims to examine the way a past experience is transferred to the present and how it is transformed into a field of representation in the practices of Michael Landy, Anny and Sibel Öztürk, Hale Tenger and İlya Kabakov. In the study, the relationship between memory and space and the relational effect of the installation were examined using qualitative research methods. The results showed that past experiences could not be transferred to the present as they were and that they created relational representation space that was reconstructed under today's conditions.

## Keywords

art, past, experience, space, representation

## Highlights

- Contemporary art practices recreate past events and experiences through ready-made objects, providing viewers with a personal and historical space in which to interact with the work.
- The relationality of art practices highlights the interactions between the artist, the work, and the audience, allowing art to be experienced through different perspectives.
- Artists who addressed their past experiences recreated the places, memories and events in their memories through representative spaces through installations.

# Geçmişin sanat pratikleri aracılığıyla yeniden inşası

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## Atıf

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## Öz

Sanatçılar, geçmişte yaşadıkları deneyimlerini sanat pratikleri üzerinden ifade ederek, geçmişin kişisel ve dönemsel dinamiklerini hazır nesnelere aracılığıyla günümüze taşırlar. Hazır nesnenin kullanımı ve çağdaş sanat pratiklerinin anlatı potansiyeli ve ilişkiselliği, izleyicilere mekânsal deneyimler sunar. Bu pratikler, geçmişte yaşanan deneyimi bugüne taşıyarak izleyicilerin tekrar deneyimlemesine olanak sağlar. Bu çalışma, geçmişte yaşanmış bir deneyimin bugüne aktarılma biçimini, Michael Landy, Anny ve Sibel Öztürk, Hale Tenger ve İlya Kabakov'un pratiklerinde temsil alanına nasıl dönüştüğünü incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Çalışmada bellek ve mekân ilişkisi ile enstalasyonun ilişkiyel etkisi nitel araştırma yöntemi kullanılarak incelenmiştir. Yapıtlar üzerinde yapılan incelemeler sonucunda, geçmişte yaşanan deneyimlerin olduğu gibi bugüne aktarılamadığı ve bugünün koşullarında yeniden inşa edilen ilişkiyel bir temsil mekânı oluşturduğu görülmüştür.

## Anahtar kelimeler

sanat, geçmiş, deneyim, mekân, temsil

## Öne çıkanlar

- Çağdaş sanat pratikleri, geçmişteki olayları ve deneyimleri hazır nesnelere aracılığıyla yeniden canlandırarak, izleyicilere yapıtlarla etkileşim kurdukları kişisel ve tarihsel bir alan sunmaktadır.
- Sanat pratiklerinin ilişkiselliği, sanatçı, yapıt ve izleyici arasındaki etkileşimleri ön plana çıkararak, sanatın farklı perspektifler aracılığıyla deneyimlenmesini sağlar.
- Geçmişte yaşadıkları deneyimleri ele alan sanatçılar, belleklerinde yer alan mekânları, anıları ve olayları enstalasyon üzerinden temsili mekânlarla yeniden oluşturmuşlardır.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Memory and space play a central role in understanding human consciousness and cultural history. The manner in which past experiences, historical elements, and cultural heritage are approached, remembered, and transmitted is examined through the lens of memory. Space, on the other hand, represents the physical locations where experiences and memories occur. Thus, space directly connects with past experiences, events, and specific moments, functioning as a tool for recalling the past. It enables people to connect with their past experiences and memories, thereby representing the sites of specific events from the past.

Contemporary art practices allow for an understanding of the relationship between memory and space. Spatial art practices, such as installation, revive past events and experiences, offering personal and historical representations to the spectators. Artists produce works that embody the past by using various materials and multimedia tools. These works prompt us to question which images of the past reside in our memory and the impact of space on our recollection. The use of objects as carriers of memory in art practices has led to the emergence of an art space where the spectator interacts with the work. In this context, artists have represented images of past times by bringing the spaces associated with those memories into the present through their practices.

This study examines the art practices produced by artists focusing on their personal experiences and seeks an answer to the question of how a lived experience is conveyed. A search was made on how the personal and collective experiences of the artists, which intersect with themes such as migration and identity, are expressed through art practices and how these experiences are transformed into a transformation process through these practices. A literature review was conducted regarding the research and qualified research methods were used for detail and research. In the study, content analysis methods were used to add Michael Landy, Anny and Sibel Öztürk, Hale Tenger and Ilya Kabakov, who changed the personal experiences from the past, period dynamics, memory and space relationship by basing the production process on concepts such as migration, history, home and identity. The method was analyzed through implicit messages, symbolic expressions and cultural codes in visual materials. Content analysis is a research method used in social sciences to obtain meaning and inferences from written and visual media images. Content analysis does not consider the physiological reflections of the data but rather texts, images and expressions prepared for meaning and interpretation (Krippendorff, 2004, p. xiii).

## The representation of images in memory within space

The process of recalling the past involves the formation of images of events or experiences in our minds. These images can be through the senses of sight, sound, smell,

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taste, and touch, and our ability to represent the past offers a broad perspective on who we are, shaped by our subjective experiences. Our ability to represent the past also plays a critical role in learning and teaching processes, contributing to the development of historical consciousness and a sense of identity. Therefore, the ability to reconstruct the past through images formed by the senses of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch is one of the fundamental elements that make us human, and is vital to preserving and transmitting collective memory, identity, and cultural heritage.

The events or experiences we live through become ingrained in our memory through the senses. Marcus Tullius Cicero (2017) in his text *Memory Images, Memory Spaces* states that sight is our sharpest sense and that perceptions we think about and hear are more likely to leave a lasting impression or become permanent if they are transferred to our minds through sight. He suggests that imagining things we have not seen as images, silhouettes, and shapes in our minds helps preserve the visual representation in our memory. However, according to Cicero, who argues that all thoughts require a place, thoughts, like everything else, need a residence, as it is impossible to conceive of a material object without a location (2017, p. 48-49). In this context, all the information and perceptions that we internalize in our memory reach our minds through the senses. Therefore, thoughts and information should not only be handled through the sense of sight but should also be placed in a place. In other words, mentally positioning each thought and piece of information within a spatial context ensures that this information is meaningful and permanent. As a result, visual representation of information and placing it in a mental space increases the ability of the memory to leave an impression and increase its permanence.

Henri Bergson also asserts that events occurring in our daily lives are recorded in memory as images. Everything that is recorded occupies a place in memory within the confines of time and space. Developing Cicero's idea, Bergson expressed that there can be no image or memory without space and time (2017, p. 167). Memory exists by creating space for everything, and as soon as space exists, it begins to form a memory. Thus, when examining the relationship between space and memory, it becomes an intertwined, inseparable, and integrated concept.

Our past experiences transform into memories under the influence of the individual's perception and sensory modes. Later, they find a place in memory. Memories carve out a space for themselves within the present. Beatriz Sarlo articulated her thoughts on this matter as follows (2012, p. 9): "Memory depends on today because, as Deleuze said, based on Bergson, the specific time of memory is the present time: Thus, the only suitable time for remembering, the time claimed by memories, is the present." Past events often cannot be left behind temporally because of their impact on our present and future. Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno explains the dialectical relationship between memories and the connection between the past and the present: "Memories cannot be stored away in drawers; the past is inseparably linked to the present" (2021, p. 173). The past is integrated into the present time. The past becomes not only a historical record but also an active force that shapes our current and future lives.

In the process of transforming personal experiences first into memories and then into long-term memory, an individual's emotions, thoughts, and intuitive characteristics are emphasized. This reflects the subjective imprinting of experiences into memory. This personal process plays a crucial role in the representation of experiences, as well as in the construction of identity, history, and collective memory, because the way memory represents the past, formed through subjective experiences, aids in understanding the past and the physical archive. Sarlo articulated the relationship between personal experience and representation as follows (2012, p. 21):

The narrative of experience depends on the body and voice, on the subject's real presence on the stage of the past. There can be no testimony without experience, but there is also no experience without narration; putting it into words frees the silent experience, saving it from directness or oblivion, making it transmittable, that is, making it everyone's.

For past experience to be communicated to others, it must be transformed into a narrative, writing, work of art, or some form of representation. Therefore, experience and representation complement each other.

Another subject shaped by personal experiences is images. Images are formed through past experiences. In other words, "the past is a perpetual accumulation of images" (Nabokov, 2017, p. 272). The past experience is not just the sum of events that occurred, but also the re-formation or imaginative construction of those events through personal perception, senses, and imagination. The past becomes present through images. This phenomenon, created by images, reminds us of the non-linear nature of time and the complex structure of personal or collective memory. The images of past events that we conjure in our minds enable us to re-experience those experiences. Paul Ricoeur described the relationship between images and the past with these words (2020, p. 23):

It is observed that the presence that constitutes the representation of the past is the presence of an image. We claim that we are recalling a past event or that we have an image of that event in our mind; this image can be visual or auditory, and we do not distinguish between the two.

As Andreas Huyssen suggested, human memory can be considered an anthropological datum to be studied. All forms of representation—whether in image, language, narrative, or recorded sound—are concerned with memory. Memory does not preserve the past "as-is"; instead, it reconstructs and represents past events and experiences through a subjective filter (Huyssen, 1999, p. 13). Huyssen viewed memory not merely as a repository for the past but as a process that continuously reproduces and alters the past. The past, which does not exist in memory "as-is", becomes a memory through the subjective images we create, and finds visibility when expressed and transmitted through experience. In this context, experiencing and recalling an event is a process based on representation created by images. Thus, to experience or remember a past event, one needs to resort to representation. This representation can be seen not as an exact replica of the past in memory but as a reinterpretation reconstructed from the perspective of the present. Patrick Hutton explained this as follows (as cited in Özaloğlu, 2017, p. 17-18):

When we recall, we place the images of the past in specific locations. The images in memory are always fragmented and transient. They do not acquire a coherent and consistent meaning until they are situated in concrete places. These places are the spaces of our memory. Therefore, remembering can be described as a process of imaginative construction. This process involves integrating specific images, formulated in the present, with particular contexts from the past. The recalled images are not echoes of the actual past but representations.

Memory does not merely preserve the past; it also creatively revives subjective experiences. This process leads to the selective retention of certain memories in the recall process, while others are forgotten. Thus, memory preserves and transmits significant memories that hold individual, collective, and cultural meaning through representation. The formation of a "gap between experiencing an event and recalling it within a representation" highlights the personal processes that shape subjective experience and its memory. This gap represents the difference between the lived experience of an event and its reconstructed—or represented—version in memory. Huyssen suggested that rather than ignoring or lamenting this gap, it should be seen as a powerful catalyst for artistic and cultural creativity (1999, p. 13).

The act of defining and naming everything and every phenomenon through language, i.e., representation, is made possible by memory. Art can be considered an original language that fulfills one of the most critical functions of memory. Art enables us to view and make sense of ideas, objects, or events from different perspectives. The process of symbolizing an idea, object, or event—of representing it—creates a form of expression within memory. Thus, representation is the most fundamental method of objectifying memory. In this process, representation stabilizes what is perceived for the individual and allows for its multiplication in terms of meaning. An image or representation can reappear in different forms across different times and spaces. Therefore, memory is both static and in a state of flux. Representation, which creates a form of communication with memory, can be interpreted in various ways depending on perceptions and needs. In art, representation holds such a meaning. Even though art may acquire different meanings when viewed from diverse perspectives, it retains the power to convey the representation created by the artist. In this context, we can understand that memory and representation mediate both forgetting and remembering (Erzen, 2020, p. 60-61).

### **Representation of the past through art**

In contemporary art practices, space has been utilized as a tool for representing past experiences. Particularly in installation art, the constructed space does not remain merely a visual element; it also forms interactive areas that can be entered and experienced. The way art uses space demonstrates how exhibition formats and interactions with the audience have evolved. The spatial transformation of art has progressed from bourgeois salon exhibitions to the "white cube" and eventually into public spaces. The transformation of public spaces often parallels the opening of art to outdoor environments. The expansion of art into public and non-gallery spaces has also

paved the way for practices that center on audience participation. Therefore, the changing spatial transformation of art enables new modes of exhibiting and utilizing space, allowing both the artist and the audience to experience greater freedom. In this context, the shifting relationship between the artist and the audience permits a redefinition of art's role in space. The activation of art in various spaces integrates it into everyday life. By bringing every subject from life into their artistic productions, artists erase the boundaries between art and life.

During this process, there has been an increase in experimental disciplines and practices that involve the body in art. In traditional art disciplines, spectators attempt to interpret the work by looking at it, whereas in contemporary art disciplines, such as installation and performance, spectators become participants by engaging with the work. Jacques Rancière articulated the shift in the spectator's perspective from traditional to contemporary art with the following words (2021, p. 11): "We need a theater without spectators, where those who are watching learn something rather than being seduced by images, where they become active participants instead of passive voyeurs." Rancière argues that contemporary art practices serve as tools that prompt spectators to take action, transforming them from passive recipients into active or participatory agents (2021, p. 11). Consequently, spectators take on an active role within the art, becoming researchers and participants. Spectators interact with contemporary art works, engaging all their senses with the piece, thereby experiencing it rather than merely observing it. Thus, contemporary art shifts the spectator from a passive to an active position, making art an experiential and interactive endeavor.

Interactive art practices reach the audience through mediums such as performance, process art, and installation. Nicolas Bourriaud explained the interaction, relationships, and transformation of space within art during the 1990s with the concept of "relational aesthetics". Art now exists as a relational encounter without a fixed form, creating a communication language in various ways (Bourriaud, 2018, p. 17-27). Relationality allows for the reshaping of cultural and social relationships and experiences in the spaces where art practices are exhibited. For example, activities like cooking for visitors in a gallery space or developing collective production methods strengthen social dialogues. Relational art practices today create spaces that allow for the experience of these interstices, facilitating the transmission of the past images stored in the artist's memory. Bourriaud explained this as follows:

Utopia today exists in the realm of subjective daily life, lived in real-time as the concrete experiences that were consciously left incomplete. The artwork emerges as a social interstice where these experiences and these new 'possibilities for living' seem possible (2018, p. 68).

Contemporary art practices bridge past experiences and memories to the present through representations. These practices create a bridge between the past and the present, enabling the representation of past experiences in the contemporary moment. Memory is a significant focus for many artists in their creative process. Alongside societal and collective memory studies, personal memory studies are also frequently

explored. Personal experiences, past memories, events, places, and objects form part of the archive within personal memory. However, "the past does not exist purely within memory; it must be articulated to become a memory. A gap inevitably forms between experiencing an event and recalling it within a representation" (Huyssen, 1999, p. 13). This gap can manifest through artistic productions. What is formed is not the past itself, but its representation through recollection. Artists also engage with the past through their own experiences, reconstructing it to create new spaces of representation. By carrying past experiences into the present, they reconfigure them with contemporary representations.

Artists who engage with their past experiences recreate the spaces, memories, and events stored in their memory through installation practices, forming representational spaces. The theme of the home often holds a significant place in artistic production. Michael Landy, for instance, constructed an exact replica of the house he lived in as a child within a gallery space, displaying the two halves of the house in different locations. One half was exhibited in the Millbank entrance of Tate Britain, while the other half was placed in the Duveen Gallery section. The large-scale installation, titled *Semi-detached* (image 1), was meticulously crafted to resemble the house as it was 25 years ago when Landy's father, John, became incapacitated following a mining accident. The work also documents his father's identity transformation through videos, highlighting the role of the house in this transformation (Racz, 2012, s. 232-234). Thus, the role of the house in identity transformation is emphasized.

The house is not just an object, a building, but a scattered and complex situation that unites memories and images, desires and fears, the past and the present. The house is also a series of rituals, personal rhythms, and the routines of daily life (Pallasmaa, 1994, p. 17).

By conveying the experience of a space from the past, Landy creates a connection between the past and the present. In this context, *Semi-Detached* serves not only as a construction made of bricks but also as an archive of personal memory, encompassing memories, experiences, and the rituals of daily life. Viewers not only physically experience the space, but also interact with the daily routines, British working-class memory and social dynamics that take place there.





Image 1. *Semi-Detached* (Landy, 2004)

Anny and Sibel Öztürk, in their work, explored the concept of home as shaped by their experiences between Turkey and Germany, focusing on the relationship between migration, journey, multicultural past, memory, and space. In their piece titled *Rear Window* (image 2), they recreated a room from their aunt's house in Istanbul, which they visited during their childhood in Turkey. By utilizing various methods such as light, sound, scent, and video recordings, they aimed to revive and bring past experiences into the present. Rafael von Uslar described this work as follows (2011, p. 17):

The installation allows for a wide-ranging synesthetic experience. The representation of memory is conveyed so intensely that it is remembered as both space and event. The spectator recalls experiencing the space; the experience is not imaginary but real. Indeed, they have truly been there.

The Öztürk sisters often rendered the spectator a part of the artwork, making the space experiential through memory.



Image 2. *Rear Window* (Öztürk & Öztürk, 2005)

Hale Tenger, who aimed to convey the era and her experiences through spaces from her past, recreated her house in İzmir with faithful attention to the original. By reviving the home where she lived, she incorporated her observations, memories, impressions, and experiences from Turkey into her 1997 installation *The Closet* (image 3). This installation was organized for ArtPace's (The Contemporary Art Foundation) artist residency program in San Antonio. Tenger included only three rooms from her house in the work, positioning a dining table against the wall in the corridor area. She sought to replicate the atmosphere of the house where she was born and raised by using objects such as a radio, books, handwritten notebooks, furniture, sewing materials, and clothing. This arrangement, reflecting a typical middle-class Turkish family home, features a radio recording that plays news from the 1980 military coup. The turbulent, chaotic, and conflict-ridden environment outside during that period created a different order within the home. The frugality of lighting, listening to the radio while eating, and everything being orderly and in place concretely depict this altered order. The desk in the bedroom, holding a social studies book, a penmanship notebook, and an Türkiye İş Bankası piggy bank, represents the objects commonly used by every child in Turkey's primary education during their developmental stages. The closet is the most personal area of the installation, featuring colorful clothes from the 1970s-80s hanging on a rack. The events of that period and the experiences stored in memory become readable through these objects (Antmen, 2007, p. 81-87). This installation opened up a space for spectators to understand and experience the dynamics of personal life and the era, alongside Tenger's personal and period-specific experiences. Thus, the concept of the home is not merely a living space but also demonstrates how it serves as a carrier of memory and history.



Image 3. *The Closet* (Tenger, 1997)

Another artist who brings his past to the present with his art and allows us to experience the Soviet Russia period is Ilya Kabakov. Kabakov created an installation called *The Toilet* (image 4) for the Documenta IX exhibition in Kassel in 1992. However, Kabakov's works are not specific to a specific place, they consist of temporary houses or spaces. Kabakov's work called *The Toilet* is a classic Russian outdoor toilet. With separate entrances for men

and women, the installation looks like an old toilet building from the outside. The interior, unlike the exterior, is a classic Russian village house. When they enter, the audience encounters an unexpected spatial and temporal experience. Therefore, not only the interior installation, but also the building itself is considered a sculpture. The space that looks like a toilet from the outside is an ordinary Soviet house consisting of two rooms inside. The daily life of that period is reflected by elements such as open, wallless toilets, a table, a bed, a wardrobe, a bookcase and a reproduction of a picture hanging on the wall. The placement of a jacket on a chair and unwashed dishes give the impression that someone had lived there before (Boym, 2009, p. 442-449). Kabakov sought to demonstrate that the space is not just a work of art but also a living space by constructing the reality of everyday life. Spectators who directly experience the space engage with the representation of a lived-in environment from the past.



Image 4. *The Toilet* (Kabakov, 1992)

## Conclusion

The past does not remain in memory exactly as it was experienced. Experiences are simplified, filtered and transformed into images, which are then stored in memory. Perceiving and remembering the past through images results in the reproduction of that past image in the mind, which is then archived in memory as a new image and encompasses the process of remembering. This process has been a source of inspiration for artists who focus on personal experiences, as they transform the images in their memories into representations through contemporary art practices. The inclusion of the ready-made object in the form of expression of art and the transformation of representational tools have offered an interdisciplinary approach and a free field of movement. Therefore, the use of the ready-made object expands the conceptual and intellectual boundaries of art, directing the viewer both to the context of the object and to the field of experience. In this context, representation not only facilitates the transmission of the context, but also provides space for the repetition and re-

experiencing of that experience through space, sound, smell, taste, touch and all kinds of visual representations. Therefore, the existence of any representation can be a sufficient catalyst for the repetition or re-experiencing of a past event. This representation, however, should not be seen as an exact copy of past experience, but as a form of relational communication reconstructed under the conditions of the present.

In contemporary art, artists frequently use practices such as installation, video, and sound to recreate the past with the aim of allowing it to be re-experienced. These artistic practices transfer memories, events, and experiences from the past to the present, enabling spectators to experience past time. In this context, such works created by artists based on their personal experiences become images representing those experiences. The experience materializes, creating a space of interaction between the artist, the artwork, and the spectator. In this way, a past experience is presented to the spectator through the artwork via the medium of art. Artists such as Michael Landy, Anny and Sibel Öztürk, Hale Tenger, and Ilya Kabakov aimed to represent memories, experiences, and the era by reconstructing specific parts of the homes they lived in the past within gallery spaces, using objects and space as mediums. For these artists, the concept of home provides a space to express their personal pasts and origins. Thus, installation becomes a tool for reconstructing and conveying past time through the use of objects and space.

Contemporary art practices are effective tools for representing and conveying the experience of the past to the present by transforming memories and events in our memory into images through perception and senses. Artists who approached their personal experiences from different perspectives brought together the past and the present, erasing temporal and spatial boundaries.

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