

fig. 64
 Cover Chapter Seven: Call and Response Agon
 oil, acrylic and ink on wood,
 2010,
 40 x 27.5 cm / 16 in x 11 in

CHAPTER SEVEN.

Artistic Ground: Cultural Inheritance, Struggle, Respect, Material and Identity

Intercultural, not globalized; call-and-response, not
Oedipal.

— Mark

Word!

— Brandl¹

A Speech in Turkey

In most chapters earlier in this dissertation I applied an invented conceit to each unit individually. This chapter's extended metaphor is an actual relic of use. While working on the rough draft, I was invited to give a speech in Turkey as part of an artist and art student cultural exchange between the Borusan Art Center in Istanbul and the Art Academy of Liechtenstein, where I teach art history and painting. I decided to give this chapter as the speech, thereby testing out my idea on a public new to me before writing it out in full. I also attempted to metaphor(m)ally integrate some of the content of the essay into the structure of the presentation. Moreover, I continue to find inspiration in the integration of form and content in the marvelous book suggested to me by Philip Ursprung, Giuliana Bruno's *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film*.² Therefore, I have decided to keep as much of the original form of the speech as possible in this final draft of the chapter, including the Powerpoint images I used and the phrases I had translated into Turkish for them. As much as I usually despise Powerpoint presentations, I tried to make these only accompanying images somewhat entertaining. The inset captions under some of the images are based on the spontaneous short apostrophic comments I made when presenting the images. The pseudo-epigraph above clearly reflects this trope in a light-hearted fashion. There were sections of my speech wherein I summarized elements of my dissertation as a whole in order to supply a sense of the context in which this chapter appears. Leaving them in would be unnecessarily repetitive for readers of the whole dissertation. Therefore, I have eliminated them, mentioning

¹ Imaginary personal communication with myself.

² Giuliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film* (New York: New Left Books, Verso, 2002; paperback, 2007).

that fact in the first instance where this occurred below, or retained, but shortened them when they are necessary to the flow of the speech. Pleasingly, the audience of Turkish artists, art historians and curators was very responsive to my speech (as well as the other two by visual artist and author Peter Stobbe and communications designer Klaus Lürzer). Thus, inspired by the moment, I became more polemical and motivational than I had originally planned. This is a practice I am happy to have learned from African-American preachers. For the printed version here, I have toned this down a bit, but retained the tenor with its gradual intensification toward the conclusion.

This chapter is meant as an aside. I allude to the idea in Chapter One, on page 12, where I wrote, "Although clearly inspired by Freud, Bloom can be pushed beyond the simplicity of most interpretations of Oedipal father-figure relationships." Below, I describe the possibility of this non-Oedipal interpretation or variation on Harold Bloom's antithetical revisionist theory of agon, of misprision in artistic creativity. Bloom's notion is perspicacious and very influential on my theory of metaphor(m), but I believe an adaptation of it replacing oedipal desire with dialogical call-and-response is even more promising.

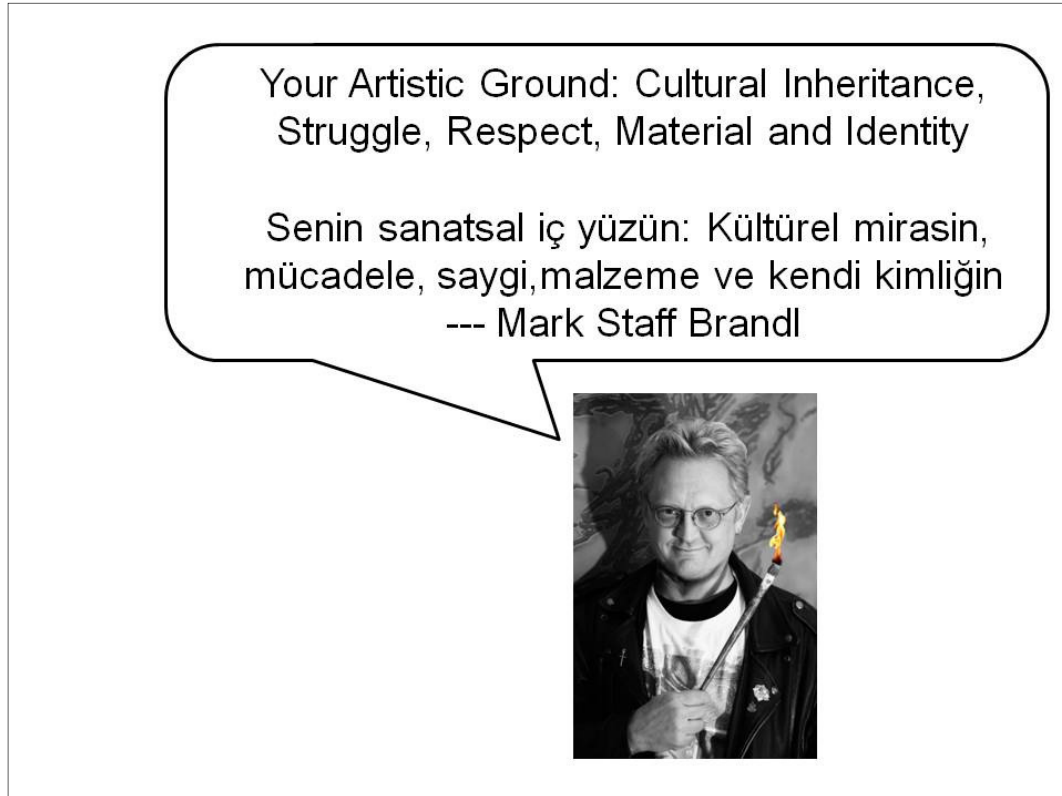


fig. 65
First PowerPoint image from speech

Intercultural, not globalized;
call-and-response, not oedipal

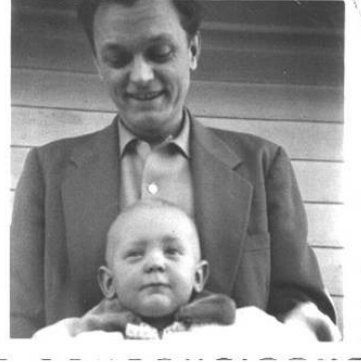


fig. 66

That is me as a baby, with my father, who about that time gave me my first brush with which to paint.

Özür dilerim ama ben malesef türkçe
bilmiyorum. Yinede ilginiz için çok teşekkür
ederim.



fig. 67

Me in my role as an art historian.

Background, Our Artistic Ground

As I began my speech in the Borusan Art Center in Istanbul, I said the following. "First, I apologize for not speaking in Turkish. Unfortunately, I only speak English, German and Latin. I do not want to take it for granted that everyone speaks English, but it is my mother-tongue, internationally useful, and I thank you for granting me your attention." The projected image above bears the same message in Turkish, which I attempted to read aloud. I then began my presentation.

In my PhD dissertation, now being completed, I present, test and embody my own theory of metaphor in visual art, which I think has a direct bearing on the interaction we are having this week between the Art Academy of Liechtenstein and Istanbul artists connected with the Borusan Art Center. The Title is *Metaphor(m): Engaging a Theory of Central Trope in Art*. — and so on. The term *metaphor(m)* ...

(That is a representation of a fade-out, as I will spare the current readers the rest of my introduction, as I mentioned above.)

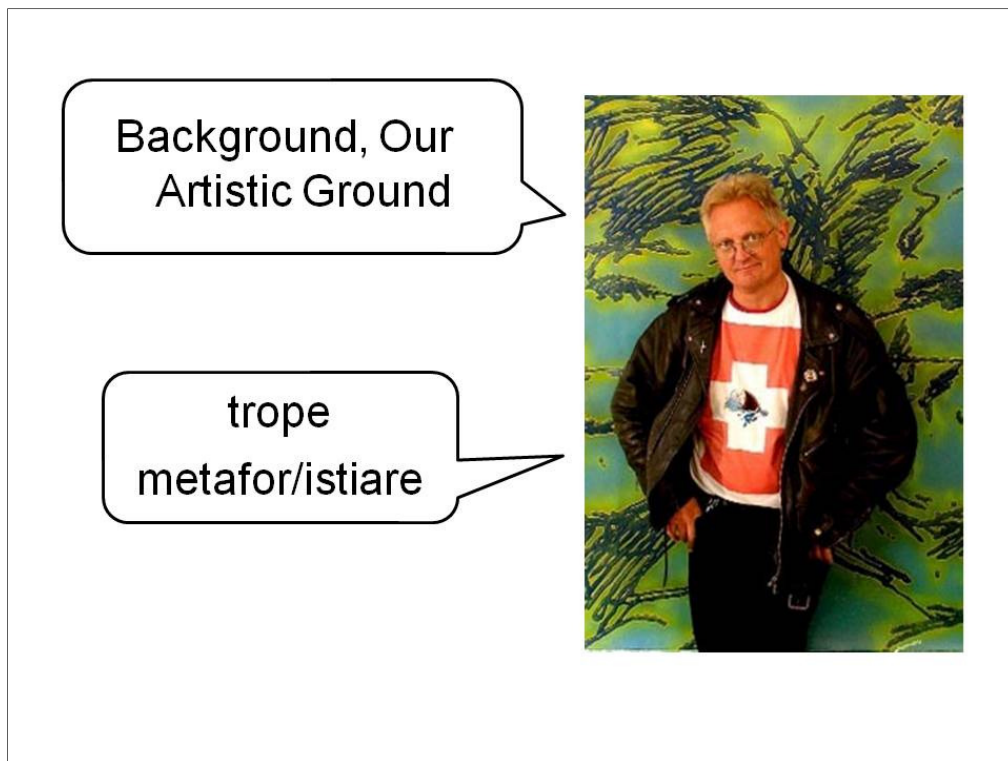


fig. 68
Me in my role as an artist.

This theory is grounded in the continuing scholarship on conceptual metaphor pioneered by cognitive linguists, particularly George Lakoff, Mark Turner and Mark Johnson. Especially significant is their assertion that trope is the basis of thought, thus language, which arises from bodily, cultural and environmental experience. Furthermore, creators' personal and cultural process to discover these individual central tropes is a struggle into which they enter with their precursors, as argued by Harold Bloom in his work on poetic misprision.³

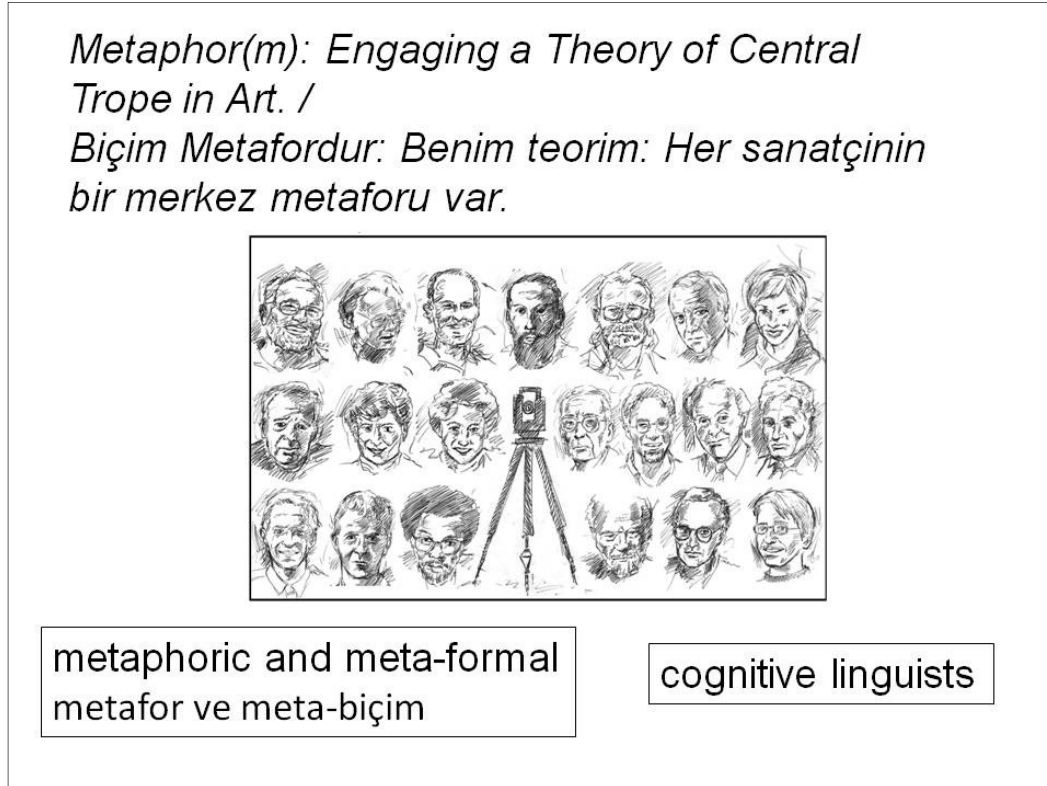


fig. 69

These are portrait sketches of the major philosophers who have influenced my theory.

I agree with literary theorist Harold Bloom that every artist must wrestle with his or her precursors, the ones who inspired them to be artists in the first place, while also struggling against themselves and previous versions of themselves. "Strong" creators, as Bloom calls them, form new and independent spots for their creativity in a continuous conflict, which he terms *agon*. Bloom's thought is very oedipal: from the Oedipus complex (1910), coined by

³ As developed in his trilogy of books:

Harold Bloom, *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982; paperback, 1983).

Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973).

Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975; paperback, 1980).

Sigmund Freud from Sophocles' play *Oedipus Tyrannus*, in which the title character, the Theban hero, answers the Sphinx's riddle and unknowingly kills his father and marries his own mother. Overly simplistically described, Bloom's theory contends that artists have a central rivalry with the past, with those artists who came before them.

However, in this speech, I assert that such agonistic, dialectical struggle is more than simply oedipal. Art sometimes advances through homage (think of Jazz) or through wholly new pressures and skirmishes. This is particularly important today, when many of us have multiple cultures and complex relationships to tradition and anti-tradition. Artists' inherited cultures are wrestled with in complex fashions in their artworks. Creators struggle against their inheritances, yet also pay respect to them, thus using them as material in the construction of their singular identities, in the establishment of the terrain on which they are grounded and, contrarily, from which they journey.

Cultural Inheritance

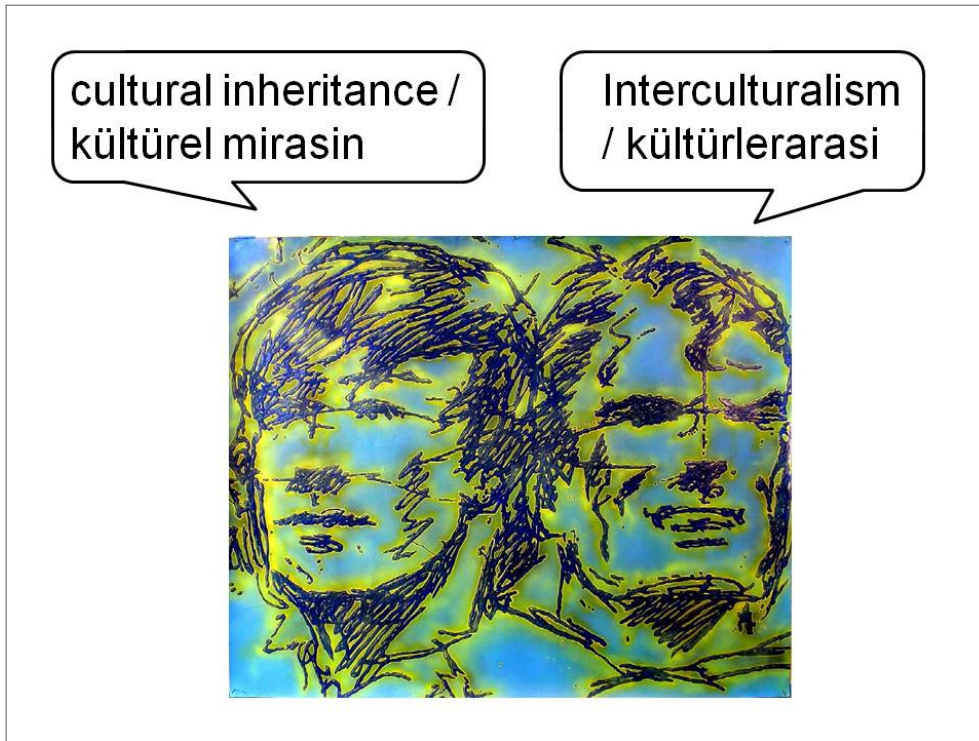


fig. 70

This is a painting of mine based on my own cultural inheritance. On the left, John Lennon in his Beatle days and on the right, Superman, based on the style of his artistic creator, Joe Shuster. I was an 11 year-old Mersey-beat fanatic after the Beatles hit the US. I heard that and saw Superman, and loved my Dad's lettering, and knew I wanted to do "something like that."

Inheritance, roots, are important, particularly to those of us who are bi- or multi-cultural. A few personal facts as an example: I am seemingly simply an American from the Midwest, Chicago. Yet actually spelled out, I am a German-American, now also Swiss, who grew up mostly influenced by African-American culture in music and religion and Jewish culture in the comics. The strength of the African influence on me was reinforced when my wife and I lived in the Caribbean. My life-long best friend is an American scholar of Islamic poetry and mysticism. Both my American and Swiss cultures alone, in themselves, are actually highly complex mixes of cultures, even if they seldom want to admit this, except in very simplistic platitudes. No matter what the right-wing media tries to label as "unfashionable" or the like, combinations of cultural influences are the wave of all future development. Due to the complexity of Turkish culture and its past, I am certain most of you in this room have similarly multifaceted, interlocking personal roots and influences when you consider them. Turkey is one of the most promising areas for international — not global — intercultural art.

Cultural Inheritance is, nevertheless, at the very least perceived and colored by the individual and by the particularities of our times and societies. In many ways, we living artists have lost a certain naïve belief in the conventional structures of our inherited cultures, while still retaining them as inner drives. However, this is not necessarily distressing.

In Chapter One of my dissertation I quote the friend I mentioned above, Prof. Th. Emil Homerin. Repeating him here:

When a myth or belief is no longer accepted as a literal account, whether due to a period of crisis or cultural transition, it may be recast in a new form, humanizing and assimilating more primitive dimensions by the symbolic and evocative nature of metaphor. The primary symbols of a culture are then perceived and colored by the individual consciousness receiving a specific complexion over long periods of time, and their multiple, often subtle, meanings lend themselves to those religious and poetic usages whose function is to establish man's meaningful existence in a seemingly indifferent world.⁴

Some so-called "lost beliefs" are better seen as returns to the spiritual bases of the principles in ways more humanized and more useful as material for art. They are still factors,

⁴ Th. Emil Homerin, "Echoes of a Thirsty Owl: Death and Afterlife in Pre-Islamic Arabic Poetry," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 44, no. 2 (1985), p.174.

but are most valuable when agonistically purposefully misunderstood, proclaimed and answered.



fig. 71

Struggle

Also in Chapter One of my dissertation, I describe the heart of Bloom's theory: the concept of an crucial, antithetical *agon* of each poet, which we can expand to include every artist. *Agon* is Bloom's expression for the clash occurring due to the anxiety of influence. Without exception, each artist must wrestle with his or her forerunner, the ones who inspired them to become creators originally. This requires critical conflict, thus Bloom calls it "antithetical." An essential feature of this rivalry is a strong-willed misreading of the precursor's art, which Bloom terms *misprision*, a word he borrows from Shakespeare: "So thy great gift, upon misprision growing,/" (Sonnet 87).

"Misprision" for Shakespeare, as opposed to "mistaking," implied not only a misunderstanding or misreading but tended also to be a punning word-play suggesting unjust imprisonment. Perhaps "misprision" in Shakespeare also means a scornful

underestimation: either way, he took the legal term and gave it an aura of deliberate or willful misinterpretation.⁵

Creators create themselves and their works by wrestling with their trepidation about possibly being a laggard. "Strong" artists, using Bloom's adjective, endeavor to capture some part of the position of their ancestor-figures, thus develop a sovereign position for themselves. This, he claims, is an unremitting engagement, even against oneself. This bestows upon artworks important roots in the achievements of individual artists. Such a focus on "agency" is something which appears self-evidently necessary to me, yet has been ignored or rejected in many contemporary theories. I seek a way to include agency, the conscious contribution creators make, not only in their formal proficiency but also what they have to say, so-called extra-formal concerns.

Respect

Philosopher and art critic Arthur C. Danto writes,

One final remark on negation Not every artistic tradition is woven out of nihilations of previous art—I do not believe that the history of Chinese art can be understood in those terms at all, inasmuch as Chinese painters not untypically sought to achieve what their predecessors had sought, often by deliberately imitating them.⁶

⁵ Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, pp. xii-xiii.

⁶ Arthur C. Danto, *Embodied Meanings*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Noonday Press reprint, 1995), p. 206.



fig. 72

Although clearly inspired by Freud, Bloom can be pushed beyond the simplicity of most interpretations of Oedipal father-figure relationships. In truth, I see a clearer source than in the Greek myth of Oedipus for Bloom's thought in Jacob's struggle with the angel (or God) as described in the Bible⁷, not detailed in the Qur'an, but discussed by Qur'anic commentators as a walk and debate with an angel; or in the African spirit Eshu, the patron saint of crossroads, who is both young and old simultaneously and who is fond of playing tricks on people for the purpose of causing maturation. The river Jacob crossed to have this important encounter is the Jabbok River, also now called the Zarqa River. The name *Jabbok* is quite rich in associations, being an aural anagram of Jacob, and meaning "to flow," "to pour out," even "a wrestling."⁸ Eshu is important as he embodies much of the unity of homage, development, questioning and agon present in African-American artistic expression, particularly Jazz, which inspired this insight in me. Thus, blending the traditions I mentioned, I call my version Jabbok-Eshuian agon. This odd blending is an application of my theory structurally and offers a doorway into

⁷ Jacob is an important figure for Bloom, however my suggestion is that his account of agon should be even more closely tied to the story and that of Oedipus be abandoned totally.

⁸ *Easton's 1897 Bible Dictionary*, Dictionary.com, (Website: <http://dictionary.reference.com/>), page: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/Jabbok>; Accessed 8 May, 2010.

two rich storehouses of foundational cognitive metaphors, thus helping to further integrate the Lakoffian and Bloomian facets of the theory of central trope.

Although my own music of choice is aggressive "garage" rock, the Blues (especially Chicago's electric Blues), R&B, or, alternately, experimental music in the classical tradition, Jazz has the most to teach us in visual art. It is the child of the blues, like R&B and Rock, yet has made the most radical and promising structural, compositional discoveries in the history of music as we know it.



fig. 73

(Clicking on the speaker icon in the original PowerPoint image played a sound bite of a Gospel singer/preacher proclaiming and then being answered by the congregation and choir.)

In Jazz, individuals express themselves in soloing, yet must also listen to one another and communicate in order to create a progression, a conversation, with harmony and accord. Beyond this, (and syncopation, blue notes and more), the startlingly important invention in this music, useful to a new intercultural art, is the kind of communication between players known as a call-and-response pattern. This is a common element in the African-American Church and its Gospel music and preaching, where there is interaction between speaker and

listener in which all of the statements (*calls*) are answered by expressions from the listener (*responses*) — they talk to one another. My suggestion is that we in visual art should too. If there were African-Americans here in the audience, you would hear open agreement or disagreement with me now. Hopefully, supportive calls of "word" or "amen." Thus my epigraph above.

We need this form of conversational, perhaps even argumentative homage and transgression. The relations among cultural aspects can be seen as not oedipally belligerent, but not as untroubled either: a model which presents the possibility of a productive transmission of culture, grounded in modes of vernacular interchange. This authorizes, in a sense, successors who also alter the traditions *without* being obliged to symbolically slay them. This is not a burden of tradition —when you examine the world of jazz you will find a culture and a model that has been, and remains a hot bed of innovation. Rock carried that on in open loud passion and interracial influence. Hip-hop now continues cross-generational cultural transmission by providing a new lyric to older tunes, quite literally. We in the visual arts can do likewise with our cultures.



fig. 74
Paintings and painting-installations of mine.

In my opinion, as an artist, one can do whatever arises out of the true experiences of your own background. Your sources must be personal and "earned." As an example, my own artwork is something of a "mongrel" or "creole" combination of installation, painting, sign-painting, philosophy and comics: all important parts of my biography. The word *creolization* is no longer employed exclusively to describe Caribbean Creole culture. A broad anthropological term, it now describes any coming together of diverse cultural traits or elements to form new traits or elements — thus a complex process of cultural borrowing and lending in an area with many different influences.

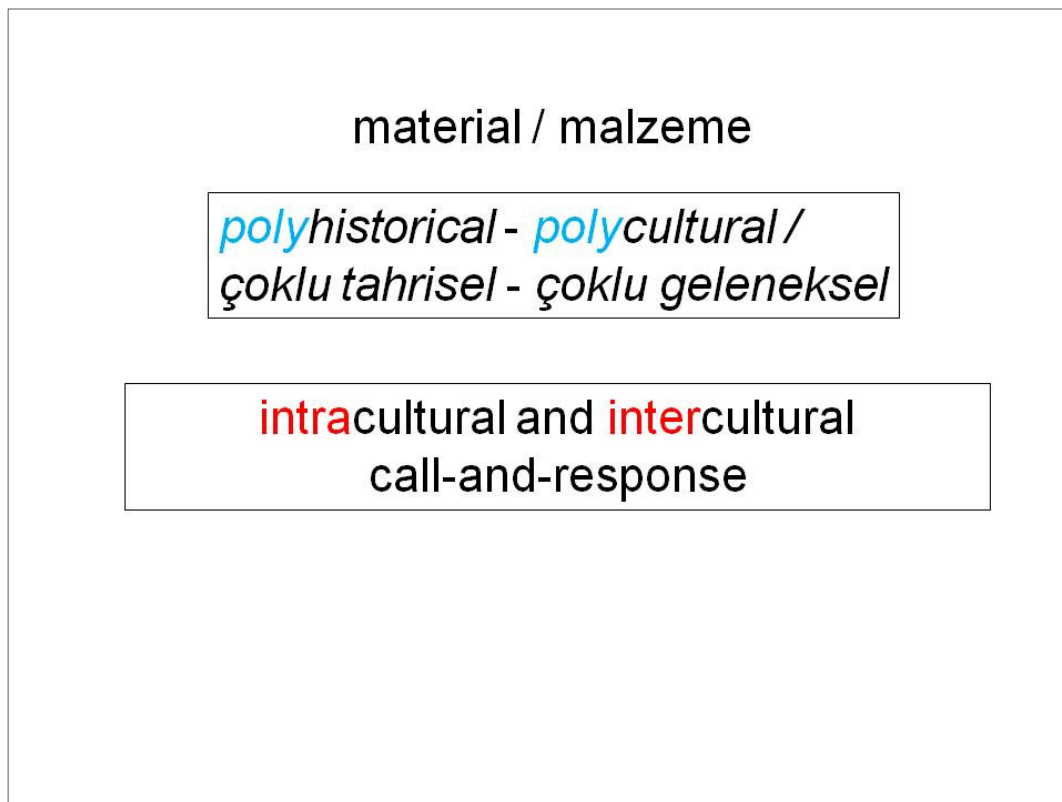


fig. 75

I am against purism in all forms. I find it morally and politically questionable. It is a trope of fascism and racism. Comics and many other demotic, vernacular, or "street" art-forms are inherently impure entities offering emancipation from narrow reductivism. This is a trait to applaud and emulate in the fine arts, and one that in the call-and-response form I advocate could incorporate Bloomian agon. I am trying to make art that is radically technically non-exclusive, even expansive. The in-betweenness of my art has important social, cultural,

psychological, even ethical implications — as well as historical-philosophical ones. The future of art might not be *posthistorical*, but rather *polyhistorical*. Not "global" but *polycultural*: a braided rope instead of a straight, single timeline. Let's allow ourselves the vanity of hope in this direction. I have a chapter in my dissertation addressing such models of art-historical time, how they affect our thought. In it, I proselytize for this braided rope image.

Material

In short this *intracultural* as well as *intercultural* call-and-response is our material in the coming post-postmodern world. It could allow us to form truly democratic, dialogical approaches, yet based upon the theory of misprision — answering and purposefully misreading our cultures, as I described. Let us look to our situations, our cultures, both respecting and questioning them. Yet not look to any imagined, ethnic truisms. In particular, let us look at our minorities. They are both inside and outside the culture, giving them a particularly critical vantage point. Just as the best of US culture derives from the merger of various cultures and religions, as in Jazz, Rock and comics, so can visual "fine" art reach new, unimagined creativity by this method. For example, I feel Germans should look to the Turkish-Germans, Switzerland to the ex-Yugoslavians, Tamils and so on (as well as their own original four cultures), Turkey to the Laz, Kurds, Alawites, Armenians and so on. And each minority should look more purposefully to its own minorities as well as to the mainstream culture — and all of us to each other. A dialogue with many many, voices, disputing as well, yet complementing one another in new ways — not unifying, harmonizing!

I am not promoting a so-called "multi-culti" approach, which advocates various cultures tolerating one another, but retaining their differences. I believe a complex, dialectic merger is important. Yet, this ought not to be insipid fusion, which is sentimental; this is a struggle, as outlined above, and must bear the marks of this scuffle. It should be an allusive yet affirmative struggle of reversals, performed with resolute discontinuity on a stage of one's own knowledge, with psychological and spiritual desire. The artwork *itself* is central in this: the way it is made, not just its idea — for the way it is made is the true idea, hopefully the embodiment of the complex creolian, dialogical approach I have described, as personalized from your own unique life.



fig. 76

Identity

Do we lose identity in this openness to others, even others within us? No, rather we gain. I never feel more American than when I am in Europe, nor more European than when I am in the US. Being me means being American, Chicagoan, German, Swiss, African, Christian, Buddhist, Midwesterner, big city, small town, working-class, intellectual, Rocker, street-kid, professor, lover of comic books, painting, art history — expressing all of these and questioning them — an artist. Being you may mean being Turkish, Ottoman, Istanbulian, Anatolian, Muslim, Christian, secular, religious, Sufi, Laz, Armenian, Kurd, Sunni, Byzantine, Alawite, big city, small village, European, Asian, Middle-Easterner, middle-class, multi-lingual, whatever, — expressing all of these and questioning them — artists.

Cultural inheritances are plural, and are necessarily perceived and colored by the individual. Let us pay homage to them, transgress upon them, criticize them, be informed by them, blend them. Be culturally dialogical artists.

CHAPTER SEVEN: THE SEQUENCE

In Istanbul...



The Borusan Art Center...



... invited three of us who teach at the Art Academy of Liechtenstein and our Foundation Course students for an artist/student residency and exchange.



(This is a view of the Prince's castle above Vaduz, not our school building!)

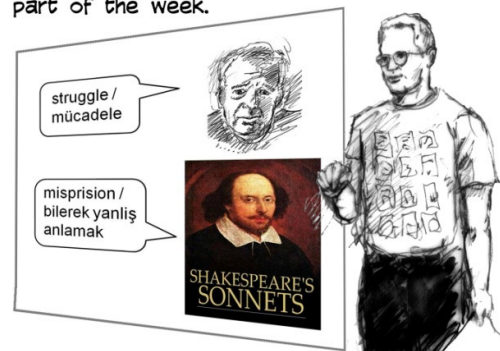
Dr. Peter Stobbe, and artist, author and the school director,



Klaus Lürzer, a visual communication designer and instructor,



... and I all gave speeches as a part of the week.



I gave a version of this chapter, wherein I call for a call-and-response-styled misprision of Harold Bloom's theory of misprision.



Replacing his metaphor of Oedipus -



keeping the Sphinx, in a way, ...

... but eliminating the "replacement of the father" aspect ---

By emphasizing the struggle as debate.



Supplanting Oedipus with a combination of Jacob's wrestling, or arguing, with the angel (or God) and Eshu, the African spirit of the crossroads, trickery and maturation.

On the road, crossing the River Jabbok, the creator struggles with his angel, who is Eshu and God.



Eshu: both old and young, mature and immature, protector of travelers, yet instigator of productive chaos.

Eshu renames "our Jacob," Israel ("he who struggles with God") but most of all, graces him or her with his own name, Eshu.

