

Conditio Humana: Mapping the Codes

Necmi Sönmez

Ali Cabbar's production process throughout the past forty years alludes to mind maps made up of specific focal themes approached from various angles at different times. Based in Brussels, Cabbar's figurative expression loaded with graphic elements is a diary of the changing political, social, and economic segments not only in Turkey, but also all over the world. Emanating from these aspects, his variety of works—whether paintings or installations, sculptures or reliefs, drawings or artist books—all emphasize his experimental methods. Moreover, the mapping techniques that he has developed form an intriguing “narration” by going back and forth between fragments of his past. While this narration is a reference to the testimonies shaped by the political migrations in the artist's own life, it also brings forth Cabbar's ironic perspective in face of global problems arising simultaneously throughout the world created by underhanded liberal economic implementations.¹ Before going into these details, I would like to talk about some of my observations regarding Cabbar's artist book.

An artist's attitude towards a self-edited publication about him/herself always differs from that of art historians, curators, writers, and sociologists. Ali Cabbar doesn't follow a chronological theme in *System Error*. The visuals, made up of works from different periods created under different circumstances, strike through the pages one after the other, displaying the path of the artist from his start to the present without a temporal or spatial reference, hence in a way removing themselves from the fictional aesthetics of art history. What interests me as an art historian are the variations created by this “elegant tripping up of art history.” In other words, how can we look at an artist's works without the interference of categorisations? *System Error* views the artist with a visceral impulse all while aiming to map a different visuality by pushing aside the connections between the years, themes, and techniques. Can this be considered an act of drawing up new memories? Are we facing a Dadaist performance that pushes aside relationality? What would we see if we were to follow an artist's formation processes through the tracks defined by him/her? Cabbar's book provides multi-layered visual answers to these and similar questions. Both the images and hashtags referring to social media tools—which create the layers in the book—suggest that Cabbar has attempted to map not only his own works, but also the sociopolitical events of the years between 1980-2020 to which he has been witness. This has prompted four different identities as the basis in designing the book: “Prisoner, Fugitive, Refugee, Exile.”

Cabbar views himself and the world through the perspectives of these four different identities, and his narrative carries a “human focus” sustained by many different techniques from painting, sculpture, photography, installation to the use of found objects. The seemingly anonymous “figures,” which at first glance seem to be obliterated of all personal features and appear based on a cause-effect relationship in all of Cabbar's works, also carry certain codes. They enclose important details that denote sociopolitical developments specific to Turkey, but also have global significance. The details in the graphic narrative

bring together polar opposites such as positive-negative / empty-full, which compose the divergent aspects of cultural history. This also shows that the artist has developed a language that makes reference to contemporary political events through the combination of “fictive surrealism” with a collage aesthetic similar to that of John Heartfield.² From the time he started publishing magazines with mimeographs³ in his youth, through his graphic arts education and then while making a living as a graphic artist using printing and press techniques, Cabbar developed his expressive language by focusing on the *conditio humana*.⁴ The “multi-layered” analogue and digital works, made apparent with more than four hashtags on several pages,⁵ are a reflection of his interest in all concepts of the human condition. Careful observation reveals the visual coordinates created by the artist between concepts and layers. The “interrelated associations” Cabbar forms while revisiting his earlier works, whether his 1982 woodcut prints or 2015 drawings, are a disclosure of the intrinsic relationship the artist has established with different printing and duplicating techniques over the past four decades. At this point, it’s worth mentioning that because of the superimposition of his own printing techniques while working on paper, canvas, wall art, or three dimensional objects, it becomes hard to discriminate whether these are drawings, paintings, or prints—and it is this palimpsest sense that the book is centered around. Although not obvious off hand, Cabbar enjoys surrounding the audience with his own impatience and desire to constantly leap forward. Hence, while vector graphics, canvases, three-dimensional objects, woodcuts and potato prints, and installation-like works show up in unexpected places in the book’s flow, they likewise unpredictably disappear. This conceptive recurring chain of disappearing and reappearing is Cabbar’s rhythm in expressing the *conditio humana*. The drama, comedy, beliefs, insufferableness, and fragility of this being called “the human” is Cabbar’s point of origin. The interaction of beginning and endpoints of his sequential works continuously bring the human figure to the forefront as a leitmotif.

Cabbar’s solo exhibitions from *Exilic Existence* (2005) to *Monster* (2020) all aimed at questioning concepts shaped by the political scene. *System Error* not only illuminates the thinly woven web between these works, but also displays surprising spikes. Sometimes the artist produces a “One Second Performance”, at other times, he opens up different parts of his studio to the viewers, displaying the cause-effect relationship in his visual works. Designs, photos, and drawings inspired by the “must” of social media aesthetics—selfies— and self presentations are used together with documentary photographs of the artist’s various exhibitions. Let’s not forget that Cabbar is an artist professed to be in his maturity. Yet, one of the major merits of this book is to show that the artist consciously backs away from a style emphasizing this maturity and chooses to remain a “pupil.”

1. One of the most significant ways this irony is demonstrated is in Cabbar’s use of black humour in creating anagrams. In his 2019 solo exhibition at the Split Fine Art Museum, the derelict neighbourhood of Dolapdere becomes Eldorado, resembling the developers’ ambitions in the neighbourhood to the Spanish conquistadors’ search for gold in the colonies. You can read my interview with the artist in the article titled “Dolapdere’den Eldorado’ya: Küçük Bir Mahallenin Öyküsü” in *Art Unlimited*, Volume 51, 2019. Istanbul: Unlimited Publications. p. 48-50.

2. The similarities between John Heartfield, who was influenced by the Dadaist tradition, and Ali Cabbar is not so much in form as in their artistic stance. I suggest looking at the recently opened Heartfield archive for this purpose: <https://heartfield.adk.de/feed>
3. From Ali Cabbar's email dated 9 July, 2020.
4. For further details: https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conditio_humana, Access Date: 13 July, 2020.
5. It is important to note that the social media style, with Cabbar's use of hashtags, holds the gist of his works. Together with the titles of the works, this serves as a tool to guide the viewers.