

Duygu Demir

Nicosia, Cyprus, 2010: The Fragment

In early 2010, as he waited for a meeting with the ambassador of the Republic of Turkey in Nicosia in Northern Cyprus,¹ Johann Pillai, a comparative literature professor and founding director of the local art space Sidestreets, sat facing four mosaic panels leaning on the wall, which he would later discover, were in fact placed upside down. (Figure 1) The caption next to the mosaics attributed the panels to the late Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu (1911-1975), an artist from Turkey known not only for his instantly recognizable appropriation of Anatolian motifs, but also for his poetry. The label included information about how the panels had come to be on the island: there had been an exhibition of Bedri Rahmi's works in Nicosia in 1962, and these panels were only a section of a larger gift to the Cyprus Turkish Armed Forces Command (KTAK) after the event, with the rest installed in an officers' mess at the military barracks. It was also mentioned that according to various sources there were two hundred of the 50cm wide and 200cm high panels, but that KTAK didn't have exact information about the artwork as a whole.²

Made of a seemingly infinite number of triangular and square-shaped tesserae set in concrete, the panels featured white diagonals and spots of red, brown, and turquoise floating against a swerving deep lapis lazuli background. At first glance, it seemed like an abstract geometric composition.³ During his meeting, the newly appointed ambassador asked Pillai whether he would be interested in exhibiting these mosaic panels at Sidestreets. After obliging, Pillai began to trace their story. Over

1 In the text, I will be using the terms "North Cyprus" and "South Cyprus" to refer geographically to what lies to the North and South of the United Nations buffer zone in Cyprus, in order to steer clear of any political alignment. As the "Cyprus dispute" is an ongoing dispute, the self-declared state of Northern Cyprus, or officially the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus is only recognized by Turkey and is located in the Northeastern part of the island. The international community accepts Northern Cyprus as part of the Republic of Cyprus.

2 As recounted by Johann Pillai to the author in an online exchange, (May, 2015).

3 In fact, the four panels were not only placed upside down, but were also missing a central piece, and had been pushed together, which made the stylized imagery of *horon* dancers depicted in this fragment of the mosaic mural even harder to recognize. (Sometimes spelled as "*kharon*" in Greek, this dance is characterized by its circular nature and distinct short steps of the dancers. Today, *horon* is also danced in regions of Greece where Pontic refugees settled after 1922.) The mosaic wall included many iterations of *horon* dancers throughout.

the course of the following months, what had initially begun as a small inquiry would turn into an obsessive research project, and the history of the panels would be uncovered through his intense detective work. Pillai quickly discovered that most of the information provided by the label he read in the embassy's waiting room was historically inaccurate. There had never been an exhibition of Bedri Rahmi's works in Cyprus in the 1960s, nor were the mosaic panels ever officially gifted to the Turkish army or the embassy there. It was actually the caption's least certain contention that came closest to the truth: the panels at the embassy and those at the officers' mess that it alluded to were parts of a two-hundred-panel mosaic mural, namely Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu's lost mosaic wall from the Turkish Pavilion at the world's fair in Brussels, Expo 58.

Taking up Bedri Rahmi's mosaic wall as a material case study and cultural barometer of two markedly different moments in time—the Turkish Pavilion at Expo 58 and its resurfacing more than fifty years later in Nicosia—I examine the transformation of this symbol of Turkish modernism into an emblematic historical artifact, a signifier of the foundering project of Turkey's modernization and national identity. While the analysis of Turkey's participation in the first world fair that

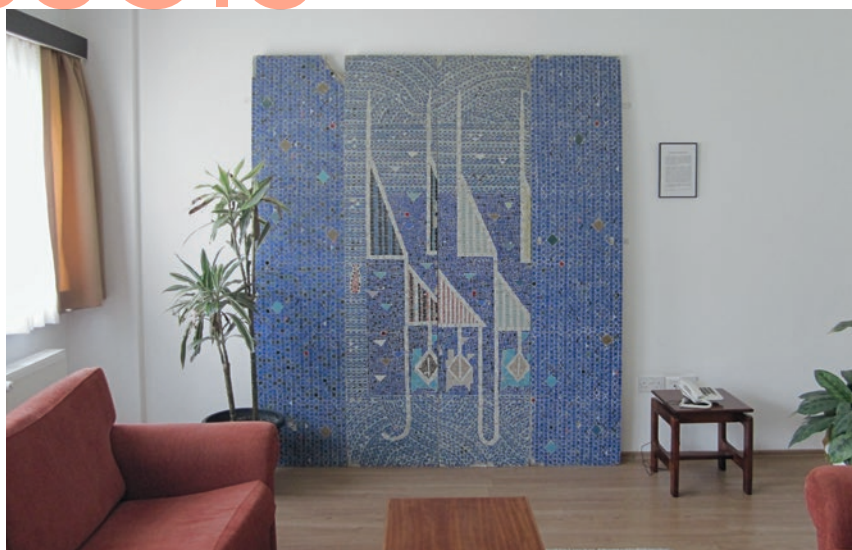


Figure 1: Waiting room of the Embassy of the Republic of Turkey, Nicosia, Cyprus, 2010. Photo: Johann Pillai © Sidestreets Educational and Cultural Initiatives, Nicosia, 2010.

was organized after the end of the Second World War reveals competing ideas of national identity that were inscribed into the construction of the pavilion, the complicated afterlife of the mosaic wall attests not only to the dissolution of Turkey's ideas of self, nation, and modernization as they were expressed through a specific iteration of modernism, but also traces the gradual decline of the hopeful internationalism that marked this mid-century moment. As art historian Romy Golan posits, "no work registers twentieth-century doubts about the identity and meaning of art more sensitively than the quasi-mural."⁴ The mosaic mural I examine reflects not only doubts about art but also about its usage within a construction of national identity; I foreground the story of the mosaic wall rather than the pavilion as a whole, as the fate of the wall is deeply intertwined with Turkey's political history. The mosaic wall is inscribed and re-inscribed during its curious itinerant afterlives, subjected to neglect, physical fragmentation, illegal transportation, mortar and artillery fire, and storms. The mode in which the mosaic wall represents a nation on the international arena, then *scatters*, and finally re-surfaces in 2010, begs for it to be read as a palimpsest. The mural becomes a bearer of meaning far beyond the initial intentions of the artist; its multiple strata allow for a reflection on the temporal changes that befall art and architecture amid political shifts, ideological re-castings, and aesthetic negotiations.

Brussels, Belgium, 1958: The Pavilion

In 1956, excited by the prospect of going to Belgium, four young architects at the Fine Arts Academy in Istanbul dropped their ongoing work for a competition to design a university campus building and switched gears to imagine a national pavilion for Turkey's participation at the upcoming world's fair.⁵ They only had a few days to submit a proposal for Expo 58 in Brussels. Turkey's themes for the pavilion were "A Link

4 Romy Golan. *Muralnomad: The Paradox of Wall Painting, Europe 1927-1957*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 1.

5 The architects were Utarit İzgi (b. 1920–2003, project leader) and Muhlis Türkmen (b. 1923–2014), who were both lecturers at the Istanbul Fine Arts Academy at the time, and their assistants Hamdi Şensoy (b.1925) and İlhan Türeğün (b. 1927–2014), both graduates of the academy. İzgi, Türkmen and Şensoy had all been assistants to Sedat Hakkı Eldem (1908–1988), an avid supporter of a culturally specific, national modernism who taught at the academy for nearly a quarter century. Johann Pillai, *The Lost Mosaic Wall: From Expo 58 to Cyprus*. (Nicosia, 2010), 20–26.

Between Old and New” and “Turkey: Crossroads of Civilization.” At first, the young architects thought of creating a covered marketplace with numerous shops, much like the Grand Bazaar in Istanbul, a fifteenth-century Ottoman building, with multiple domes and labyrinthine alleyways. But the bazaar idea was scratched quickly, as the architects realized its anachronism and decided on two square-shaped buildings with open plans, connected by a wall that pierced through them. The smaller of the two buildings was a modernist take on the wooden Ottoman-Turkish house. A wood-framed structure with a flat roof, and raised on stilts, it had an outdoor café downstairs and an open-plan restaurant on the second floor accessed through an external staircase. The larger building was a steel-framed structure with a glass-curtain wall; this transparent box was to be used as the exhibition space. For the architects, the red teak-wood building represented Asia, while the glass box stood for Europe.⁶ The entire project was conceived of as a prefabricated unit that could easily be disassembled, transported back to Turkey, and reassembled in Ankara at the end of the six-month-long fair as an exhibition complex.⁷ (Figure 2) A 2.2-meter tall, 50-meter long continuous wall that bisected the pavilion grounds connected the two buildings. It started beneath the restaurant and cut through the space between the two buildings, creating a courtyard behind. The wall further continued into the glass box, dividing the exhibition hall into two rectangular blocks, creating a U-shaped, linear circulation pattern for viewing the exhibits. The wall was significant not only as the anchor of the pavilion plan, a feature connecting the two buildings and organizing circulation, but also because it acted as the support on which Bedri Rahmi’s 100-meter mosaic mural was displayed.

6 In her article about the 1958 Turkish Pavilion, architectural historian Sibel Bozdoğan discusses the architectural details of the pavilion beyond its modernist context, analyzing its historical references and the bureaucratic forces at play. She argues that while for many countries at the fair the glass-box-curtain-wall theme was unexciting, for Turkey it was a new signifier of belonging to an international and modern community in the postwar world, in perfect alignment with Turkey’s joining of the UN and NATO in the geopolitical context of the Cold War. See Sibel Bozdoğan, “A Lost Icon of Turkish Modernism: Expo’58 Pavilion in Brussels.” *Docomomo Journal* 35 (2006): 62–70.

7 As the technologies required for the production of the steel frame and the modular glass panes were not available at the time in Turkey, they were commissioned from the Belgian firm Bâtiments et Ponts de Bruxelles, and ground was broken in September 1957.

Duygu Demir

Another Kind of Muralnomad: Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu's Mosaic Wall from the Turkish Pavilion at the Brussels Expo 58



Figure 2: Utarit İzgi (middle) with the model of the Turkish Pavilion for the world's fair in Brussels, 1958. SALT Research, Utarit İzgi Archive.

The mosaic wall was then tasked with acting as “the bridge between Europe and Asia,” now an exhausted metaphor, still in use as a shorthand to refer to Turkey’s geographical and political predicament at large. It aligned perfectly with how a *Time* magazine article had described the artist Bedri Rahmi himself a few years before the fair: “one of Turkey’s best contemporary painters...who has one foot firmly planted on either side of the Bosphorus [sic], paints pictures that could never have been done farther east of Paris or west of Baghdad.”⁸ Bedri Rahmi had decided to combine the styles of “the primitivists from the Occident

8 “Art: Brilliance on the Bosphorus.” *Time*. September 14, 1953, 70.



Figure 3: Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu and an assistant working on a similar mosaic mural in the spring of 1960. It was commissioned by NATO for Palais l'OTAN in Paris after the blue mosaic wall caught a NATO member's attention at the Brussels fair. Because Turkey had plans for the pavilion back home, it was suggested that Bedri Rahmi make a new mural, pictured here in the making, for NATO's new building. This predominantly red mosaic mural was unveiled in 1960, and is now in the new headquarters of NATO in Brussels. NATO Archives.

and the miniatures of the Orient” during his early years as a student in Paris.⁹ By the time of the fair in Brussels, he was a well-established figure, his mature style of transforming folkloric motifs from Anatolia into colorful modernist figural abstractions already widely recognized and popular. He had started working on murals in the 1940s, first upon the invitation of a young Turkish architect, who had returned to Turkey after having worked in Le Corbusier’s office.¹⁰ Unaccustomed to the size of large walls, as opposed to the canvas he had been working with, and frustrated by the material limitations of fresco-painting techniques, Bedri Rahmi began experimenting with pointillism, trying to emulate the historical mosaics he saw at the Byzantine Chora Church in Istanbul while they were being renovated (1947-1958).¹¹ His pointillism became a material condition when he turned to mosaics and began working with tesserae that he patiently cut and colored in his studio. (Figure 3)

The mosaic wall at Expo 58 does not unfold in a linear manner but is composed of vignettes that are united through a continuous blue background. The human figures, as well as the abstract motifs, are often non-perspectival. In certain moments it has site-specific allusions; in the section under the restaurant building, there are various female figures holding trays of food, water jugs or holding hands as well as a large tree of life with abstracted birds perching on its branches. The central section of the mural between the two buildings, easily visible from the main circulation path of the Foreign Section, the Avenue



- 9 Quote from a letter Bedri Rahmi wrote to his art teacher İbrahim Çallı back in Istanbul while he was studying in Paris. Ömer Faruk Şerifoğlu, *Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu*. 1. ed. T.C. Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı Kütüphaneler ve Yayımlar Genel Müdürlüğü; 3319. Anma ve armağan kitaplar dizisi; 33. (Ankara: Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı, 2011), 36.
- 10 Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu, “Yapı ve Resim” [Building and Painting] in *Ülkü*, no: 49 October 1, 1943. Bedri Rahmi’s first mural commission was for a swimming pool complex, upon the invitation of Halit Femir. Neither the pool complex nor Eyüboğlu’s mural survive, partially demolished and turned into a nightclub in the early 2000s. It is very likely that Femir’s invitation to Eyüboğlu was the result of a direct influence of Le Corbusier’s ideas of collaboration with artists (his *Pavilion des Temps Nouveaux* at the 1937 World Expo in Paris featured murals by his friend artist Fernand Léger, and coincides with the time Femir would have been working for him).
- 11 Ali Cengizkan, “Bedri Rahmi’nin Bilinmeyen bir Mozaïği: Mimarlık ve Duvar Resmi,” in *Modernin Saati* (Ankara: Mimarlar Derneği & Boyut Yayınları, 2002).



Figure 4: Section of the mosaic wall featuring architectural and geographic references to Istanbul. SALT Research, Utarit İzgi Archive.

de l'Europe, serves as a map of Istanbul, which includes recognizable architectural landmarks such as the Maiden's Tower, the Grand Bazaar, and the mosques on the historical peninsula, depicted in an isometric perspective reminiscent of miniature painting. (Figure 4) The part that extends into the glass pavilion is more figural, offering a catalogue of Anatolian archetypes mapped by Bedri Rahmi. There are many iterations of *horon* dancers, followed by single figures; a musician playing a *saz* (a Turkish stringed instrument like a lute), a mother cradling her baby, a shepherd leaning his head on his crook, another carrying a ram over his shoulders and other female figures and children. (Figure 5) Bedri Rahmi worked on the mosaic wall with his wife Eren Eyüboğlu, also an artist, as well as with assistants and students from the academy. The tesserae were placed faced down on sheets of paper and temporarily glued, then rolled for the trip. They were mounted on 50-centimeter-wide concrete blocks when they got to Brussels, amounting to more than 200 square meters of wall space. As with the rest of the pavilion, the mosaic wall was planned with mobility in mind, so that it could be transported and reassembled in Turkey. It received the gold medal at the expo and was lauded by the foreign press.¹²

The continuous deep blue background of the mosaic refers to *mavi yolculuk* ("blue voyage"): boat trips of a group of Turkish humanists along the Aegean coast, whose purpose was to explore coastal Anatolia. Blue Anatolianism, or Anatolian Humanism, which was articulated by Bedri Rahmi's brother Sabahattin Eyüboğlu with classicist Azra Erhat and writer Cevat Şakir Kabaağaçlı in the mid 1940s, was a specific cultural theory that perfectly aligned with state policy for a brief moment before a definitive political shift in the 1950s. It retooled a rather rigidly ethnic nationalism that pointed to Anatolia as the heartland of the Turks and justified the modern borders of Turkey in the early republican period into a soft-focus cultural embrace of folk traditions, retroactively

12 Much can be made of this award; was it Turkey's strategic geopolitical position in the Cold War that had led to this recognition? Or was the pavilion's blending of an international modernist language with local flavor through the mosaic wall that embodied the unthreatening and well domesticated difference of a predominantly Muslim and newly-minted NATO member? These questions might never be answered with certainty, but it is important to see the award not only as a proud achievement but also as potentially reflective of fair-politics, that might have mirrored the socio-political bearings of this representational platform.



Figure 5: View of the exhibition hall. Department of Architecture and Urban Planning. Faculty Library of Engineering and Architecture University of Ghent–Belgium. Archive Expo 58–Rika Devos –Dossier Utarit Izgi.

projecting Turkey into a world history of civilization that prioritized the beginnings of humanism in ancient Greece.¹³ The motivation behind this was partially complicating the Orientalist discourses that located the beginning of Western civilization in Greece by inserting Turks into

¹³ Emily Apter states that the work of Sabahattin Eyüboğlu and Azra Erhat, both teaching assistants to Leo Spitzer at the Istanbul University before World War II, “were part of the state’s efforts to establish non-Islamic, anti-Ottoman cultural foundations on which secular nationalism could be built.” See “Global Translato: The ‘Invention’ of Comparative Literature, Istanbul, 1933” in *Critical Inquiry*, Winter 2003, p. 263–281. Sabahattin Eyüboğlu and Azra Erhat were both dismissed from their state posts in 1947 and 1948, respectively. They would be jailed after the military coup in 1971, under the false accusation of having started a Communist party. During the rising discourse of “Turco-Islamic identity of the 1950s and then again in the 1970s, and further entrenched in the years after the anti-communist zeal of the 1980 coup, the Blueists were seen as “godless nationalists,” leftists, cultural prongs of RPP’s zealot nationalism, avid Westerners who only reclaimed antiquity rather than shifting the paradigm entirely, and a group of ineffective elites. S. M. Can Bilsel, “Our Anatolia: Organicism and the Making of Humanist Culture in Turkey.” *Muqarnas* 24 (January 1, 2007): 223–41, 235.

this civilizational history through a Mesopotamian/Anatolian link in the chain. Furthermore, it replaced the ethnocentric leanings of earlier theories¹⁴ with a conception of Anatolia as a melting pot (or *mosaic* if you will) of cultures. In the work of Bedri Rahmi, this took on the form of gently realist, sometimes surrealist, often figurative and increasingly geometric modernist paintings, prints, sculptures, and mosaic murals. While deeply embedded in Blue Anatolianism, Bedri Rahmi's visual output far outlived the intellectual aspirations of its theorists.¹⁵ The popular imagery that Bedri Rahmi's work provided was much more palatable than the highly sophisticated historical and literary arguments of openly leftist and unapologetically cosmopolitan intellectuals Sabahattin Eyüboğlu, Azra Erhat, and Cevat Şakir Kabaağaçlı. While the Blueists' ideas had aligned perfectly with the Republican People's Party (RPP), they quickly became

- 14 In the 1930s, two new institutions founded by Atatürk, the Turkish History Institution and the Turkish Language Institution, proposed two complimentary theories that would be integral to the construction of an understanding of national cultural heritage. The Turkish History Thesis argued, among many things, that Turkic peoples in Central Asia had established the first human civilization, and dispersed to Europe through waves of migration. It also argued that modern Turks had descended from the Hittites, a Turkic tribe that migrated to Anatolia from Central Asia. Hittites were an ancient people predating Greek civilization; therefore the theory emphasized the role of Anatolia as the cradle of Western civilization. Analogous in structure and ideology was the Sun-Language theory, created by the Turkish Language Institution, which argued that all languages were based on, and are dialects of, a primal ur-Turkish language.
- 15 Sociologist Aslı Gür posits that the implausibilities in the Turkish Thesis eventually resulted in its fading grip on the nationalist discourse, but this project of continuity was replaced by the Anatolian Civilizations Discourse, earlier iterations of which were used by the Ottoman Empire after significant loss of land in Thrace during the Balkan Wars. "Anatolian Civilizations Discourse constructs the national identity around 'the peoples of Anatolia,' which is an imagined community across ages and which shares a common identity of 'Anatolian-ness.' In this imagery, the underlying assumption is that common exposure to the same nature and landscape produces essentially similar cultures regardless of diverse origins and historical change. The central signifier, Anatolia, does not simply signify a geographical region but is rather combined with another signifier in nationalist discourse, "homeland." Thus, its meaning is intensified, and Anatolia signifies a political territory of the sovereign nation-state, the homeland of the Turkish citizens, and the birthplace of the homogenous national culture." Aslı Gür, "Stories in Three Dimensions: Narratives of Nation and the Anatolian Civilizations Museum" in *The Politics of Public Memory in Turkey*, 1st ed. Modern Intellectual and Political History of the Middle East. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2007, p.48–49. Also see S. M. Can Bilsel, "Our Anatolia': Organicism and the Making of Humanist Culture in Turkey." *Muqarnas* 24 (January 1, 2007): 223–41.

unwelcome during the rise of ethnic nationalism during World War II and were found threatening in the Cold War years to be too Bolshevik.

Even though Bedri Rahmi was part of the innermost circle of Blue Anatolianists, perhaps, it would be more apt to locate his work in the larger argument of the Anatolian Civilization discourse,¹⁶ which is more prone to being absorbed by nationalist tendencies, often losing its nuances of cosmopolitanism, and co-opted by the idea of Anatolia as land of the Turks, rather than a melting pot of diverse peoples. Unfortunately, the blue tint of the cosmopolitan Blue Anatolianism, the references to traditions and folk imagery that are common to more than one ethnic entity, hence functioning as double-sided signifiers, easily lost their nuance in populist rhetoric, led on by Bedri Rahmi's apolitical stance over the years. Ironically, this made Bedri Rahmi's artistic practice politically time-proof, where aspects of modernist humanism embedded in his artistic language could easily get overlooked, overtaken or re-purposed by the indomitable Anatolianism that became deeply ingrained in the nation's psyche and visual vocabulary over the years.

131

The Multitasking Mural: Synthesizing the Arts, Unifying the Nation

Bedri Rahmi's mosaic wall was also the most visible embodiment of a crucial organizing principle of the Turkish Pavilion at Expo 58: the synthesis of art and architecture that the four architects and the participating artists championed through their program for the pavilion.¹⁷ The synthesis of the arts discourse, as the Paris-based international collective Groupe Espace articulated it, had resonated with a group of Turkish artists and architects

16 Republican People's Party was established by the founder of the republic Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, and governed the country unopposed for more than two decades through single-party rule, carrying out a series of Westernizing reforms. İsmet İnönü took over its leadership after the death of Atatürk in 1938, and oversaw the transition of the parliament into a multi-party democracy in 1946. It was especially under Minister of Education Hasan Ali Yücel's tenure (1938-46) that a Turkish humanism was directly championed by the state. Sabahattin Eyüboğlu was working for the Translation Bureau under the ministry, which oversaw the translation of world classics into Turkish.

17 See also Ela Kaçel, "Integration of Arts and Architecture in Postwar Turkish Modernism," in *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* Issue 28 (2016), ed. Sibel Bozdoğan.

in the years prior to the fair.¹⁸ Sculptors İlhan Koman (1921–1986) and Ali Hadi Bara (1906–1971), together with architect Tarık Carım (b. 1923), who had been in Paris at the time founded the Turkish branch of Groupe Espace in 1953 on their return to Turkey and published a manifesto in 1955.¹⁹ The common denominator of the multiple approaches to the idea of synthesis in the arts at mid-century was to make the built environment more humane and to give everyday spaces a sense of harmony and visual consistency. One crucial contribution of *Türk Grup Espas* was its role in addressing a prevailing question of locality as a critical response to international modernism. This suggests that Turkish architects saw collaboration with artists as a potential answer to the debates on local versus universal that surfaced in the 1940s and continued well into the 1960s: “In this kind of mediation, collaboration [of architecture] with the plastic arts offered a reasonable solution to the concerns of locality and rapprochement with the public. Addressing the desire for the creation of humanist spaces, such collaboration would be the quintessential response to satisfying the aesthetic

- 18 Groupe Espace was founded by André Bloc in Paris in 1951. Bloc and Le Corbusier attempted a postwar rewriting of the idea of synthesis in the 1950s as serving a humanist rather than populist agenda, trying to dissociate monumental modernist architecture and art from its preceding Fascist connotations. This served a double purpose; it argued for modern art as socially relevant, and oriented towards public welfare, as well as positing modern architecture as harmonious, psychologically resonant, rather than alienating and highly technocratic. The harmony of the built environment created through *synthèse* was to be ameliorative, as opposed to the totalitarian associations of the total work of art of the 1930s. See Romy Golan, *Muralnomad: The Paradox of WallPainting, Europe 1927-1957* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009). Le Corbusier’s individualistic take on the architect as master *plasticien* would result in a difference of opinion with Bloc, who was much more interested in artistic collaboration on equal terms and the political reform synthesis could take part in, connecting modern art with social welfare. Nicola Pezolet, *Spectacles Plastiques: Reconstruction and the Debates on the “Synthesis of the Arts” in France, 1944-1962*, PhD dissertation, MIT, School of Architecture, 2013.
- 19 Koman was directly involved with the Turkish pavilion at Expo’58. The sculptor was teaching at the Fine Arts Academy alongside the project’s architects and Bedri Rahmi. Among other contributions, Koman created what he called a “vertical spatio-dynamic pylon,” a 30-meter-high tower of steel with aluminum mobile parts that served as the landmark for the pavilion at the fair. The head of the Painting Department at the Fine Arts Academy in Istanbul at the time, the German-born sculptor Rudolph Belling (1886–1972), had also made synthesis between the arts and architecture the subject of his speech at the beginning of the academic year in 1952. See: Zeynep Yasa Yaman, “Siyasi/Estetik Gösterge Olarak Kamusal Alanda Anıt ve Heykel [Monument and Sculpture in Public Space as Political/Aesthetic Sign], METU Journal of the Faculty of Architecture, 2011/1 (28:1), 64.

needs of the users and was propounded by both groups.”²⁰ In the particular case of the pavilion of Turkey, the wall’s synthetic role served not only this architectural response to the international modernist premise, but also a culturally specific one, synthesizing a multiplicity of understandings around homeland, cultural heritage, and nationhood. In the background of the pavilion’s construction, a period often characterized as a break from the Turkish Republic’s earlier formative years, were ongoing ideological debates about the identity of the Turkish citizen. These debates centered on where the true identity of the nation resided, whether its representation should build on its adopted Anatolian roots or harken back to its Ottoman ones, or if a total engagement with international modernism best reflected the nation’s commitment to Westernization.

The pavilion at Expo 58 was Turkey’s most ambitious attempt at displaying its newly found artistic and architectural prowess on the world stage. It had only been a little more than a decade since the country’s switch from a single-party rule to a democratic system in 1946, followed by a dramatic upturn in the economy, an allegiance with the United States during the Cold War and membership in NATO. These changes had come in the wake of the surprise electoral win in 1950 of the more conservative but populist Democrat Party (DP) against the RPP; a statement against the legacy of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who had set the country on a secular, modern, and Western course since its foundation through a series of radical reforms during the single-party regime of the RPP. Historians interpret this decade-long period of Democrat Party rule (1950–60) as a sharp break from Turkey’s early republican era that had been characterized as a period of top-down

20 Ezgi Yavuz, “Designing The Unity: Türk Grup Espas and Architecture in Postwar Turkey” in *METU Journal of the Faculty of Arts* issue (2015/2) 32:2, p.124. For architects and artists alike, the 1950s was largely a decade in which doubts about internationalism were momentarily cast aside, and concerns of identity and cultural difference resurfaced more forcefully in the 1960s. See Bozdoğan, Sibel. “Democracy, development, and the Americanization of Turkish architectural culture in the 1950s” in *Modernism and the Middle East: Architecture and Politics in the Twentieth Century* (ed. Sandy Isenstadt, and Kishwar Rizvi) Studies in Modernity and National Identity. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008), 116–138.

reform.²¹ However, in many aspects, it was a continuation of ideas of nation-building set forth during the earlier years of the republic.

The 1950s was also a decade in which complications inherent in such a swift project of nation-building and modernization began to surface. In the early republic, the effort to connect prehistory to the present had reflected an attempt to offer a new continuity in the understanding of Turkish society's origins, but it had nevertheless created a different rupture—namely, the rejection of the immediate Ottoman and Islamic past. The emphasis on “Turkishness” during the early republican era had undermined the cosmopolitanism of the Ottoman Empire, and entailed the suppression and mistreatment of Greek, Armenian, Jewish, Kurdish, and other minorities that in many ways continues to this day. A considerable number of Turkish citizens of Greek and Armenian origin from cities such as Istanbul and Izmir left the country after violent pogroms in 1955.²² This void was filled by a wave of internal migration of low-wage laborers from the rural areas of Anatolia, highlighting the rift between the well educated, urban, Turkish intelligentsia (including artists and architects) and the masses they were entrusted to transform. By 1958, the rise of Islam encouraged by the Democrat Party's appeal to the more conservative rural population and the loss of secularism's tight grip on society under the Kemalist single-party rule created the cultural climate for a national re-alignment with Ottoman heritage.²³ For example, even though the Ottoman Janissary Band's performance in front of the glass pavilion against the backdrop of the Atomium of Expo '58 must have

21 For more on these reforms, see Hale Yılmaz, *Becoming Turkish : Nationalist Reforms and Cultural Negotiations in Early Republican Turkey, 1923-1945*. Modern Intellectual and Political History of the Middle East. Syracuse, (New York: Syracuse University Press, c2013.).

22 In 1955, the false news that the Turkish consulate in Thessaloniki, in northern Greece—the house where Mustafa Kemal Atatürk was born in 1881—had been bombed triggered violence against the Greek minority in Turkey, especially in İstanbul. During the Istanbul pogrom (also known as September 6-7 events) shops and houses that belonged to the Greek minorities were attacked by Turkish nationalist mobs, and the violence spread to other minority owned businesses and homes.

23 Sibel Bozdoğan, and Esra Akcan. *Turkey*. Modern Architectures in History. (London: Reaktion Books, 2012), 108.



Figure 6: The Ottoman Janissary Band in front of the Atomium. *Hayat* [LIFE] magazine, no. 99, August 29, 1958, pp. 12-13. Attributed to Studio İskender. Courtesy of Johann Pillai.

created a moment of surrealist collage, within the Turkish national discourse, it also illustrated a re-welcoming of Ottoman heritage into the foundational myth of the nation. (Figure 6) Of course, the national presentation at the fair was intended to display a unified front and not political uncertainty; but these conflicting positions and social tensions were embedded within its construction and presentation.

Yet, this strange hybridity reflected precisely the culmination of the numerous and often contradictory reserves of heritage that the early republic had flirted with in its construction of national identity. On the one hand, the architectural language of the pavilion—with its open plans, glass curtain walls, and steel-framed exhibition hall—posits a



Figure 7: View of the courtyard, Pavilion of Turkey at Expo '58, 1958. Photo: Burhan Doğançay. Courtesy of the Burhan Doğançay Museum and Sibel Bozdoğan.

commitment to international modernism prevalent throughout the fair.²⁴ On the other, the mosaic wall embodies the multifaceted ideological agenda of the Turkish state at the time, which sought to portray Turkey as a new nation committed to democracy, and economic and technological advancement, with a population that was simultaneously Anatolian, Ottoman, modern, Western, and predominantly Muslim. The aesthetic embodiment of these mixed messages, the mosaic wall—whose construction, as an image, is itself predicated on the illusion of unity created by the coming together of small, discrete pieces—presented the precarious construct of the nation as a unity. The unresolved negotiations between the dichotomies of East/West, traditional/modern or contemporary/historical are synthesized in the mosaic mural of Bedri Rahmi. Seen in this light, the gradual fragmentation of the wall after the fair is to be seen as a material testimony to the dissolution of the momentary coming

24 In her article “Democracy, development, and the Americanization of Turkish architectural culture in the 1950s” Sibel Bozdoğan contextualizes how international modernism acquired a specific meaning in Turkey during the 1950s, in relation to the optimism that colored the “modernization theory” championed by American social scientists and its ultimate failure to deliver on its promise. Sibel Bozdoğan. “Democracy, development, and the Americanization of Turkish architectural culture in the 1950s” in *Modernism and the Middle East: Architecture and Politics in the Twentieth Century* (ed. Sandy Isenstadt, and Kishwar Rizvi) Studies in Modernity and National Identity. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008), 116–138.

together of what still seem to be these irreconcilable commitments of the nation.²⁵ (Figure 7)

Istanbul, Turkey, 1960: The return

At the end of the fair in the fall of 1958, the pavilion was dismantled, its parts numbered, and it was loaded onto the freight cars of the Orient Express. Meanwhile, back in Turkey, the economic policies of the DP government had begun to fail, and the financial support from the Marshall Plan was running out. The overvalued Turkish Lira had caused an increase in imports and decrease in exports. There were lines in front of shops, workers' unions were shut down, and increasing rumors of corruption in government offices created distrust. Rising nationalist sentiment and the instrumentalization of religious beliefs by politicians was polarizing the students, who had started demonstrating. A group of military officers who shared the general public's grievances staged a military coup on May 27, 1960. The prime minister Adnan Menderes and two other leading ministers were executed in 1961, and the military retained control until elections in 1965. The pavilion had returned to Istanbul right in the middle of this political upheaval, and the crates were cast aside in the Gülhane Park near the railway station. The reconstruction of the pavilion as a cultural center in Ankara was never realized; the subject would be dropped for more than a decade, and two more subsequent military coups would be complicit in the erasure of its memory.

Surprisingly, in the late 1970s, the Istanbul Municipality decided to inquire into what had happened to the pavilion. It was then discovered that some of the architectural elements from the pavilion, such as the glass panels, were used as tabletops in the municipality's offices or covers in the municipal garages. About twenty of Bedri Rahmi's panels were also found at the same garage facility, used as flooring. Those were returned to Eyüboğlu's family for restoration. During the same

25 A similar analysis can be extended to the content of the exhibits and the public program of the pavilion at the fair that I do not delve into here. For more details on the exhibition itself, see: Johann Pillai, "The Lost Mosaic Wall: From Expo 58 to Cyprus." (Nicosia, 2010) and Selda Banci, "Turkish Pavilion at the Brussels Expo '58: A Study on Architectural Modernization in Turkey During the 1950s." Master's thesis submitted to Graduate School of Social Sciences, Middle East Technical University, February, 2009.

investigation, it was also registered that around a hundred and sixty of Eyüboğlu's panels were sent to Cyprus for an exhibition in 1962, yet never returned. This investigation came to a standstill with the military coup of 1980. Almost two decades later, in an article in 1999, architectural historian Ali Cengizkan mentioned the blue mosaic wall among other forgotten murals, ceramics, and mosaics that were destroyed or cast aside in over-zealous and careless renovation projects, asserting that “destruction had become an essential part of Turkish culture.”²⁶

Back to Cyprus: How did we get here?

Johann Pillai, mentioned at the beginning of this tale, picks up the story from here, in 2010. Through his unyielding inquiry into Turkish and Belgian archives, extensive interviews with the friends and relatives of Bedri Rahmi, and virtually everyone who had been involved with the fair and was still alive, Pillai solved the mystery of how the mosaics made it to Cyprus.²⁷

138

In the aftermath of the 1960 military coup, Turkey was invited to participate in a trade fair in the newly established Republic of Cyprus, where Cypriots of Turkish origin were a minority. The External Trade Office of the Turkish Ministry of Economy and Trade hurriedly appointed an official to organize the Turkish pavilion. This bureaucrat had then contacted a personal acquaintance in the construction business for help. It is not clear how it came to be, (or for that matter who exactly this businessman was) but the businessman stated that he personally had just such a pavilion at hand—which he then sent to Cyprus.²⁸ (Figure 8)

While photos taken at the trade fair in Nicosia in the fall of 1960 do not show any of the architectural components from the Pavilion of Turkey at Expo 58, panels by Bedri Rahmi can be clearly seen adorning the

-
- 26 Ali Cengizkan, “Bedri Rahmi’nin Bilinmeyen bir Mozaïği: Mimarlık ve Duvar Resmi,” [An Unknown Mosaic of Bedri Rahmi: Architecture and the Mural] in *Modernin Saati* [The Time of the Modern] (Ankara: Mimarlar Derneği & Boyut Yayınları, 2002), 237. The article was first published in the architectural journal *Arrademento Mimarlık* in 1999.
- 27 Johann Pillai, *The Lost Mosaic Wall: From Expo 58 to Cyprus*. (Nicosia: Sidestreets Educational and Cultural Initiatives, 2010).
- 28 Pillai chose not to disclose the identity of this businessman who is still alive, but conducted an interview with him for his research.



Figure 8: The Pavilion of Turkey at the Cyprus Trade Fair, Nicosia, 1960. Sections of Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu's blue mosaic wall are visible on the façade of the building. Press and Information Office of the Republic of Cyprus.

exterior walls. When the trade fair ended, the Turkish ambassador at the time expressed an interest in buying the panels. He thought them perfectly suitable for the context in Cyprus, where in the figure of a mother cradling her baby in the mosaic, the Turkish Cypriots saw an archetypal Anatolian mother, and Greek Cypriots the Virgin Mary.²⁹ (A testament to the double signification inherent in Bedri Rahmi's imagery, and precisely in line with the point of shared Anatolian heritage and melting pot theory of the cosmopolitan Blue Anatolianists). Conveniently, perhaps because the mysterious businessman did not want to be associated further with this illegally acquired artwork, he let the panels stay in Cyprus, where they were considered a gift to the Turkish Embassy.

Shortly after the fair, a Turkish colonel with a keen eye for art who was stationed in Nicosia asked the ambassador to use the mosaic panels in an officers' mess to be built on the Turkish military base, set up as part of a tripartite camp for British, Greek, and Turkish soldiers. The ambassador sent him the panels but kept a few for himself.³⁰ When tensions escalated within the Cypriot government, the Turkish army left the tripartite camp where the officers' club was located, taking the wall panels with them. In 1963, after civil conflict broke out on the island, a UN green line bisected Nicosia. During that time the panels on the exterior of the Cyprus Turkish Armed Forces Command (KTAK) building were exposed to artillery fire. In 1967, Northern Cyprus declared a provisional government, while the Republic of Cyprus functioned as a Greek-Cypriot government, without the constitutional Turkish minority presence. In 1974, a coup in south Cyprus removed President Makarios. When Makarios was replaced by a Greek EOKA member,³¹ the prime minister of Turkey, Bülent

29 Johann Pillai, "The Lost Turkish Pavilion of Expo '58." Lecture, Turkish Cultural Foundation, Istanbul, January 8, 2013.

30 These panels were taken to the Turkish ambassador's summerhouse, Villa Firtına [Villa Storm], where they were installed on an exterior wall. This is the section of the panels with the incomplete and upside down *horon* dancers that would welcome Pillai and colleagues at the waiting room of the Turkish Embassy in 2010. They had been intact until sometime between 2004 and 2006, when a strong wind dislocated one of the panels, which broke into pieces. In an absurdly circular coincidence, Pillai would discover that the new ambassador, Kaya Türkmen, was the son of Doğan Türkmen, the adjunct general commissar of the Turkish Pavilion for Expo 58. Pillai, *The Lost Mosaic Wall* (2010), 126–128.

31 Greek Cypriot nationalist guerilla organization that called for *enosis*, reunification of Cyprus with Greece.

Figure 9: View from the restaurant of the officers' mess in Nicosia with some of the surviving panels from the mosaic wall. Photo: Johann Pillai © Sidestreets Educational and Cultural Initiatives, Nicosia, 2010.



Ecevit decided to invoke Turkey's rights from the 1960 treaty co-signed by Greece, England, and Turkey, and staged military action on July 20, 1974. Sometime between 1974 and 1979, the surviving panels were again re-located to a KTA building in the neighborhood of Ortaköy, in northern Nicosia, to yet another officers' mess, where they remain today. These panels are in the best condition of the recovered panels, and they feature the longest uninterrupted series of the mosaic. Installed behind thick PVC frames in the restaurant and entrance of the officers' mess, these panels are currently inaccessible to the general public. (Figure 9)

Muralnomad

In 1952, a few years before the world's fair in question, Le Corbusier coined the term *muralnomad*, referring to tapestry as the ultimate form of a functional rather than decorative element, the mobile "mural" of modern times for the itinerant human, who could tuck it under his/her arm and take it to the next place of dwelling.³² Bedri Rahmi's blue mosaic wall is a *muralnomad*, not in the sense of mobility suggested via the Corbusian modernist ethos of an emancipated society achieved through the combination of technological advancement and aesthetics, but as an involuntary, exilic, erosive, and destructive type of mobility, suggestive of a falling apart of things forcibly put together, an unintentional *scattering*. Poignantly, in an interview months before his death Bedri Rahmi stated: "Building and painting! Painting can in no other way be rid of

32 Golan, *Muralnomad* (2009), 235–236.

Another Kind of Muralnomad:
Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu's Mosaic Wall
from the Turkish Pavilion at the
Brussels Expo 58



Figure 10: Installation view from *Bedri Rahmi, The Lost Mosaic Wall: From Expo '58 to Cyprus*, curated by Anber Onar and Emin Çizenel; research by Johann Pillai, in collaboration with the Embassy of Turkey in Cyprus, Sidestreets, October 6–November 30, 2010. Photo: Johann Pillai, © Sidestreets Educational and Cultural Initiatives, Nicosia, 2010.

nomadism...One has to be nailed to the wall in order to survive.”³³ Putting Corbusier’s mobile tapestry aside, in Turkey it seems that even attachment to a building does not guarantee the survival of artistic legacy.

In the final room of the exhibition at the small Nicosia non-profit Sidestreets in 2010, curators Anber Onal, the co-founder of Sidestreets, and the artist Emin Çizenel, presented fragments from the mosaic panels that resurfaced during Pillai’s research in a seemingly haphazard pile, in addition to the four panels from the embassy. (Figure 10) The rubble, which can be interpreted as the centerpiece of the exhibition, was presented as a “monument to fragmentation”³⁴ attesting precisely to the dissolution of the hopes and ideas of the specific moment in history that surrounded the mosaic’s creation. There is a reverse parallelism between the curators’ channeling of deconstruction and what the mosaic did half a century ago; while the presentation of the rubble activated an uneasy discomfort in the viewers through its denial of the expectation of a museumized and intact entity, the mosaic wall in 1958 was the comforting casting of small shards into a whole, a sum of different parts that came together to produce a coherent image, an image that conveyed the multiple facets of a unified nation.

While the humanist moment of synthesis embodied in the pavilion at Expo 58 remains a relatively unknown historical episode, the question

33 Cengizkan, *Modernin Saati* (2002), 234.

34 I owe this phrase to Johann Pillai, as he used it in an e-mail exchange about the project (May 18, 2015).

of Turkey's identity continues to be instrumentalized in the main opposing political parties' discourses, which at times manifest themselves in the architectural projects supported by the current government.³⁵ If the moment of international modernism of the mid-twentieth century stood for an utopian idea of full cultural and societal integration, does this current moment, marked by an erasure of memory and the political instrumentalization of history and aesthetic projects, speak to the inherent failure of a brief period of naïve international and national optimism? Are these other monuments—which are lost forever or have been left to degrade—and their histories only to serve as monuments to fragmentation?

The nomadic mosaic panels—fragmented, ignored, broken, dispersed, forgotten, rediscovered, newly prized—can be seen in their current virtual totality as a palimpsest. The only constant in this story is that their meaning keeps shifting, their surface being continuously inscribed and re-inscribed. Their scattering not only symbolizes and reflects shifting ideas of nationalism, translations of modernist architectural discourse, or failures of humanist thought, but also attests to something about the capacity of architecture and art to embody, absorb, and circulate—inadvertently in this case—things that were never planned for them during the moment of their conception.

35 Today, the extant structure closest in design and ethos to the pavilion is another glass-box, the Atatürk Cultural Center (AKM), an opera house project with roots in the early republican era, the foundations of which were laid in mid-1940s and constructed between 1956 and 1969. Another building with a convoluted history of abuse and neglect, AKM today stands in disrepair in Taksim Square, at the city's center, and has been similarly subject to shifts in symbolic meaning during the unfolding of Turkey's political episodes. It was most recently home to a makeshift police station during Gezi protests. There is a heavily contested debate around the current government's plans for the building that oscillate between its restoration and demolition.