

Eye with suspicion those who favor things over the experience of things

Vasif Kortun

2003

I agree that the notion of "responsibility" harkens back to European religious art, but not to modernism. Modernism was the moment, I believe, when the artist was "liberated" from the notion of responsibility. In referring to Le Corbusier's creation of modernist space in his urban planning schemes, Mary Jane Jacob says that he created a space of liberty from responsibility, the normal responsibility to others that creates community. Just so, "art for art's sake" isolated the modernist artist from any sort of responsibility outside internal dialogue of art itself. Public art -- with its emphasis on audience, interaction, dialogue, etc. seems antithetical to the high modernist project, perhaps more akin to pre-modernist art.

Tom Finkelpearl

It was the mid-1860s when the Sultan Abdülaziz acquired a statue from a fifth rate British sculptor and had it placed in the garden of the palace. It was a harmless sculpture of a bored lion. This was a first. Abdülaziz had visited the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1867 and he was in the know. He was the father of Abdülmecit Efendi, a painter and future heir to the throne. It was another 50 years before commemorative statues began to pop up in places like the main square of Istanbul. They were dedicated either to the founder of the country, or the war of independence. Turkish sculptors were short in coming, so artists had to be imported. There was probably no shortage of Europeans in those days of return to order. Germany, Italy and the Soviet Union led in making these statues of stability! The situation was doubly interesting in Turkey as public sculpture signified the power of the state in a place that had never seen things that static and icon-like objects on the street. For some it was a flagrant breach of the ban of images in Islam. For others, it would be a sign of civic and national pride, a place in front of which you could pose for a commercial photographer, who was always available on the spot. The tug of war between the adversaries has never subsided: between the secularist conservatives and the religious conservatives; between self-appointed modernist eurocrats, and die-hard traditionalists; between those who claim their neighborhoods and re-imagine

them as an organic outgrowth of their villages and towns, and those who exercise juridical control over them; between neighborhood allegiances, and arbitrary control mechanisms.

In the old days the sort of "public art" one was accustomed to came in the form of statues perched high on pedestals. This tradition has continued in Istanbul, to become the worst kind of derivative and delayed cultural production in the form of an authoritarian translation from historical European models. A typical piece in that sense would be the monument in Beşiktaş, built in celebration of the 75th year of the Republic. A colossal erection that overwhelms human scale and denies eye contact, this object is in complete disregard of its environment and can only to be viewed from across the other end of the Bosphorus. Governments, both city and state, from the right and left, had these things erected from stone, iron, steel, glass and aluminum. The sculpture by Adem Yılmaz on Taksim Square doubles as an ad-hoc toilet. Ayşe Erkmen's see-through, trellis-work column, has achieved a new function as a coat-rack and support for banners.

As the notion of public, as borrowed from discourses that are not translatable into different urban situations, is an untenable concept, one has to look elsewhere. A possibility exists in remaking the monumental into a temporary document, engaging multiple audiences, communitarian or neighborhood-based. The Kultur project in the 1997 Biennial was such an endeavor. The example of Oda Projesi as an artist collective that circumscribes the general public, in favor of returning the project to its representation, circumvents the intellectual dead-end of the issue of the public altogether.

Forget shared ideals!