

A Personal Account: Can the Contemporary Art World And Its Institutions ‘House the Social’?

Who are the outcasts?

In the morning, we rushed to MoMA to visit Diego Rivera, Cindy Sherman and Sanja Ivekovic as well as the print exhibitions. Having spent couple of hours; resuming the works, talking about the Occupy Museums’ protest while looking at Diego Rivera’s murals, and noticing the similarities between some visitors and the characters of Cindy Sherman that portray elderly well-off art lover Americans; we left the museum with the relief and happiness that we covered the major program of the museum and continued with other meetings and visits. {Cindy Sherman visual}

Next day in one of our meetings, while discussing the role of foreclosure in the outburst of the crisis and the function of urban regeneration for the reinvestment of the Capital to sooth the effects of crisis, our host asked if we saw the exhibition “Foreclosed Future: Rehousing the American Dream” at MoMA, which is the outcome of a series of public workshops at MoMA / PS1, responding to “The Buell Hypothesis”, a research report prepared by the Buell Center at Columbia University, to envision further possibilities in housing, spatial organization and infrastructures that could catalyze urban transformation, particularly in the American suburbs. It was more than surprising to find out that we not only missed the exhibition, but, even didn’t notice its existence while spending almost the whole morning there. We decided to spare the last bits of our ‘free’ time for this research exhibition and went to visit it even more enthusiastically. As it was a Saturday, the museum was packed with visitors and the staff was very busy and occupied. Maybe also as a part of the guilt-ridden feelings and self-questioning triggered by having missed an exhibition, which was supposed to be in front of our eyes, we urged to find the location of the exhibition and began to look for the signs, announcements and publicity material of it starting from the entrance, even including the street where the banners were hanged to inform on different exhibitions. Unexpectedly, there was no visible trace of it as if it belonged to the ‘underground’ program of the museum only accessible to a secret society or its ‘outcast’ members and audiences. When finally visiting it, we understood that the ‘outcasts’ were the graduate students and New York intelligentsia.

It is obvious that this exhibition for the museum is not a marketing machine nor very interesting/entertaining for its audience. However, the extend of not publicizing it at all together with the other ongoing exhibitions in the main areas of the museum, even not at a much scaled down proportion, may imply: It is not good for the image of the museum and it may cause a decrease in the number of the visitors, for whom it may be too serious and demanding -asks for active reading and understanding-; and/or it may bore some of the funders that it can have a negative influence on fund raising. Seeing the attempt to reduce the visibility of such an exhibition where knowledge production and artistic production can work together for the audience to produce meaning for their lives, one wonders what the criteria for the prioritization of the programing and publicity are. Evidently, the facts and figures, marketing aims and strategies, and funding possibilities are the determinant factors of the criteria rather than aiming to create a public forum around the urgent issues -like the ones put forward by “Foreclosed Future”- that have vast impact on the daily lives of each of us -the audiences.

What is marginalized and almost eliminated in the museum is the possibility to produce a public sphere that can lead to an alternative sociality. Rather than entertaining the crowds, such exhibitions propose to shift the experience of the audiences from passive reception to active learning and reacting. If these blockbuster top museums can not afford this, can these institutions still be seen as relevant places to 'house the social'?

Housing the geo-political diversity and cultural multiplicity?

Coming from Turkey (ex-periphery), each time I hear that such and such artist's work from Turkey is acquired for the collection of an important international museum like Tate Modern or MoMA, I feel proud -though sometimes, a little confused with the criteria and method.

Recently, geo-political diversity and cultural multiplicity has become an important policy issue for even the blockbuster top museums. One can assume that the post-colonial critique had an impact on the policies of such institutions so that they began to articulate the differences and also collect from previously unfavorable geo-political regions (i.e. ex-communist countries, ex-colonies or Middle East, etc.) and the artists from diverse backgrounds as well.

Often the works acquired for the collections are directly related to the specific context of the respective countries: socio-economic and political conditions, histories (specifically art histories) and market parameters. And certainly, these acquisitions have deeper impact on the art histories and market parameters of the respective countries than the institutions that include such works in their collections as they rarely exhibit those works, almost never in their permanent collections and usually only in the context of regional 'profiling': Eastern Europe, Middle East, Arab World and so on. The frequency of exposure of such works in the collections is also related to the ratio of immigrants from those countries living in the cities where these museums are located. Frequently, galleries are happy to give financial and organizational support to the museums when their artist's work is included in the exhibitions of those museums. And usually, collectors, instead of specialized curators and academics from these geo-political regions, are invited to take part in the decision-making processes and sit in the boards of these museums. Furthermore, it is not extraordinary anymore to hear that the trustees and board members are affiliated with the market and commercial world (i.e. MoMA and the Sotheby's).

Maybe 10 years ago, such affiliations with the commercial world were considered as 'conflict of interest' but today we know that the contemporary art world is akin to neoliberal agendas and life styles, thus, can function harmoniously within the market structure and parameters. Hence, it is not surprising to see in the top art institutions that the differences and multiplicities are exoticized and commodified rather than articulated. It is not difficult to make an analogy between the top fashion designer brands that desire to expand their consumer profile through coining lower-end brands for mass merchandising with the new 'exotic' collection lines of such top museums that have a claim on these issues.

Once again, we can ask if such institutions are the relevant places to house the differences.

A Complicated Case: Istanbul

Under the spell of privatizations all over the world, while the dependency of the art institutions to the private funding and commercial interaction is increasing, it generates 'growing pains' resulted in diverse complications.

Istanbul, in contrast to, for instance, Western Europe, has become the paradise for neoliberal ethos and culture -and mechanisms- since, unlike Europe, there is no institutional structures anymore -like the universities that foster criticism, or unions that can negotiate and put pressure on decision making processes- that, as a counter force, can balance out the consequences of the unregulated speculative free market rules and parameters. In Istanbul Neoliberalism reigns!

The last events related to Istanbulmodern¹ epitomize this development at its extreme. The refusal of an artwork 'as being not saleable' by an artist who was previously asked to donate a work to the fund raising auction for the education department of the museum started a short-lived debate around such issues as transparency, market, protocols of art and censorship on artistic 'freedom'. All Istanbul art world reacted: collective protest texts and petitions were sent to the museum and press; some artists protested the refusal as censorship hanging posters on the museum walls read as "We saw the censorship" and withdrew their works from the current exhibition. Among many other issues, the discussion disclosed the fact that we even do not share a common language, nor a jointly agreed protocol on how the artistic interactions can be regulated within the institutional structures. We couldn't even discuss properly as all the concepts and notions were exchangeable: some of us mistook the gesture of donation with a commission, some others confused the auction with a curated conceptual exhibition, commercial filtering with censorship, etc. Another aspect that this event unfolded for us is the lack of an organizational structure that facilitates the coordination and organization of the art world as well as negotiates certain cultural rights. The existing one, the "Plastic Arts Association" (as its name implies) does not really represent nor responds the actual contemporary art world and its needs. While the museum failed to bring together the art world to start the debate and create a 'forum' to fulfill its role –and its claim- as a 'public space', the 'victimized' artist, dramatizing his story and positioning himself as a rebellious defender of freedom of artistic creativity at different television channels almost every night, was able to capitalize the refusal and enlarge his sales capacity.

In the final analysis, everybody lost, or, from a more neoliberal perspective, everybody won: the museum gained legitimacy through overcoming such conflict with the art world -it didn't lead to a loss of prestige as artists are still happy to be invited to take part in the exhibitions of the museum-, art world showed that how solid their principles are -no one pursued the case to bring it to its limits to unfold the conflict further-, the artists who withdrew their works from the ongoing exhibition proved their political sensibilities and strengths, and lastly, the refused artist was able to –finally- appear and capitalize this highly political case.

Strange things are happening in Istanbul: Contemporary art has been fully embraced by the high society and the emerging new millionaires (%1), and consequently, large amounts of capital are poured into this field. Certainly, the continuity and sustainability of this wave –of delirium tremens- as well as the casualness of decision-making processes can be questioned, however, its impact on the art world and artistic practices are undeniably clear. While artistic production is posed against a market-driven backdrop and adjusted itself in accordance with preferences and taste of the buyers, the institutions are closing down their most-needed

¹ <http://artasiapacific.com/News/IstanbulModernDeemsArtworkUnacceptableForFundraisingAuction>

functions like the artist residencies and prioritize their investment to position themselves in the power structures. “The Istanbul Art-Boom Bubble” is title of the article that was published in New York Times (February 2012) on the occasion of re-launching of the Garanti Platform with a new name, enlarged and additional spaces and a new design. The journalist Suzy Hansen states:

“Earlier this winter, the giant 120-year-old Ottoman bank building in Istanbul reopened as a multimillion-dollar contemporary art space called SALT. [...] But the space overwhelmed the art. It was too magnificent. Nothing like SALT existed in Istanbul. Inside, the building was five floors and 100,000 square feet of carved white marble. Curators, bankers, interior designers, writers, musicians, academics, artists and wealthy wives craned their necks to take in the soaring ceiling as they climbed the grand staircases. They gaped at the stylish library, and the plush movie theater, and the smoking terrace that was also a restaurant. The great imperial bulk of SALT loomed over the Golden Horn and the forlorn rooftops below.

Foreigners and expats gushed with approval. Even the fatalistic Turks, skeptical of Westerners’ enthusiasm, couldn’t help admitting that this strange art institution was awesome.”²

These are only the two examples –though emblematic of the situation-, I didn’t even mention the transformation of major other art institutions and the market itself. However, briefly speaking, against this extravagant, almost decadent landscape, everything related to art production like the artist and writer fees, research and production costs, exhibition and public engagement budgets, etc., all seems extremely un-proportioned. For me, rather than an art-boom, we can call it as the invasion of the market ethos as it is about distribution – distribution of art and cultural production as well- to/among the most powerful (%1) in the society. It is doubtful that if there is any room in the current state of Istanbul art scene for non-commercial artistic endeavors, nor for housing the social.

Public Domain: ‘Spectacular’ Art versus Socially Engaged Art

There is a widespread convention on the public art/art-in-public domain³ as ‘art reaching larger publics’ beyond the white cube. Generally speaking, it does bring a democratic facet to the distribution and availability of art for the multitudes, and has the potential to generate a public sphere, in the sense of a public forum. However, it cannot be a starting point, a means, nor an end by itself. There is a whole amount of discussion going on related to the issues of

² Suzy Hansen, “The Istanbul Art-Boom Bubble” New York Times, February 10, 2012

³ After 1989, in the last couple of decades, together with the mega global changes and transformations in governance and ideology the concept of “public”, thus, the role of art and cultural institutions has been shifted. Furthermore, the understanding, reason d’être and aim of ‘public art’ has been changed, signified in the neologies like ‘art in public domain’, ‘art in civic space’ or ‘art as public space’, etc. While ‘public art’ is a legacy of the welfare state with the conviction that art can be used as a tool for the well being of its citizens, ‘art in public domain’ is an emancipated autonomous form of contemporary art originated in the late 50’s as a part of the institutional critique when artists left the museums and galleries to go out to the streets to situate art in the hearth of life. While public art is subsidized by governments and involved in commissioning, art-in-public domain may or may not be involved in commissioning, instead, may be an artist initiation, and can be supported by public and/or private sources. Unlike ‘public art’, which conforms to the existing status quo and governmental ideologies and programs, ‘art in public domain’ situates itself critically in the public domain, challenging the status quo, specifically unfolding the socio-political and ideological structures that we all are living in.

permanency versus temporality, facilitation versus curation, consensus versus conflict, and 'spectacular' art versus socially engaged art.

Though the social welfare state that grounds the conditions of the production of 'public art' has been eroded, its 'consensual' model is still serving to produce art projects in public domain to embellish and raise the standards of the public spaces and to function as a cover-up for architectural, urban and social 'accidents'. As every consensus involves compromises and negotiations as well as repression of the weakest voices⁴, broadly speaking, the public art projects in this sense represent an average of aesthetic understandings of the stakeholders (facilitators, commissioners, governmental bodies, artists and the public), and aim at being legible for 'everyone'. Certainly, this has further repercussions on the artistic practice by generating a concealed pressure structure on it.

In these precarious transitional times, the role of the curator as a critical agent as opposed to a facilitator became more urgent as their role today is more than a matter of creating a consensual platform around a commission in public domain. It is mainly a matter of social and political –as well as aesthetic– decisions and negotiations as the public domain is not a neutral space, but the “battlefield of hegemonic dominant forces”⁵ and art projects are the sites for branding of the public domain and instrumentalization of the publics by politicians and governments as well as public and private funders and sponsors. Thus, today the reason d'être of any art project in the public domain is to create a contrast, even add more conflict to the specific context to make this 'battle' and the conflict visible, thus, debatable. Ultimately, this leads us to issues concerning the spectacle and participation, which in turn, directs us to the question of 'spectacular' art versus socially engaged practices.

As a reaction to the indulgent style of the market-driven top art institutions that promote 'spectacular' -and sleek- art, one can easily associate herself/himself with socially engaged art practices as an antidote and a remedy. As socially engaged practices aim at distribution of art specifically to the unfavorable bottom, the nadir point of the society –as opposed to the audience profile of the top institutions that favor the middle and upper middle classes-, it can be taken as an antidote against the distribution tendencies of such institutions, which also reflects the neoliberal state's role today. Loic Wacquant –in reference to Pierre Bourdieu's concept of bureaucratic field- describes neoliberal state as stratification and classification machine: “[...] neoliberalism entails a rightward tilting of the space of Bureaucratic agencies that define and distribute public goods and spawns a Centaur-state that practices liberalism at the top of the class structure and punitive paternalism at the bottom [...]”⁶

Socially engaged art is also taken as an antidote against spectacle, which is assumed to create passive audiences that confirm with the existing status quo, and as a remedy for participatory practices, which are supposed to create an active engagement of the audiences/publics, thus, empower them. However, as opposed to this convention, Claire Bishop proposes another perspective for the audience position in the participatory practices: “[a] voluntary

4 Chantal Mouffe, “Art and Democracy, Art as an Agnostic Intervention in Public Space”, OPEN 14, 2008 pg.6-15

5 Ibid.

6 Loic Wacquant, “Three steps to a historical anthropology of actual existing neoliberalism”, Social Anthropology (2012), 20 / 1. pg. 66

subordination to the artists' will, and [...] the commodification of human bodies in a service economy (since voluntary participation is also unpaid labor).”⁷

As a part of this reaction to the top institutions and of praise for the participatory practices, many good projects that have strong formal properties -and also critical stands- were passed unappreciated, or the spectacular size and scale of a project in public domain became a matter for discrediting. However, the fact that just like the spectacular art is instrumentalized by blockbuster top institutions, socially engaged community/neighborhood art is instrumentalized by the neoliberal governments to sooth the tension and resolve the conflicts related to the immigrant communities, problematic neighborhoods and tension points like suburbs in Paris. Accordingly, it is not a satisfactory position to select one over the other. Although certain forms of art-in-public domain are more akin to exploitation and instrumentalization, rather than subscribe to one form of art –which is an easy formula-, we need to evaluate each situation and the reason d’etre of the art project in that specific context without assuming totalizing claims and generalizations on the form and content or the size and scale of the work.

In reference to the projects that facilitate social media and television –specifically Anthony Gormley’s project “One and Other” (2009), realized for the Fourth Plinth at Trafalgar Square, at which the participants were streamed live online-, Claire Bishops posits: “This proximity between spectacle and participation underlines, for me, the necessity of sustaining a tension between artistic and social critiques. [...] Rancier offers: the aesthetic regime is constitutively contradictory, shuttling between autonomy and heteronomy (‘the aesthetic experience is effective inasmuch as it is the experience of that *and*’). He argues that in art and education alike, there needs to be a mediating object –a spectacle that stands between the idea of the artist and the feeling and interpretation of the spectator: ‘This spectacle is a third thing, to which both parts can refer but which prevents any kind of ‘equal’ or ‘undistorted’ transmission’. [...] In different ways, Rancier and Guattari offer alternative frameworks for thinking the artistic and the social simultaneously; for both, art and the social are not to be reconciled or collapsed, but sustained in continual tension.”⁸

{Ayse 3 visuals} Ayşe Erkmen’s produced but un-exhibited project for the 25th Sao Paulo Biennial (2002), “Metropolitan Iconographies” was an attempt to bring the participation and spectacle together, while keeping the tension between art and the social. She asked the inhabitants of the favela in the Santana region of Sao Paulo to participate her work by sending their messages that they want to share -with almost one million visitors of the Sao Paulo Biennial- to the banner shop in the neighborhood, where a lady wrote them by hand on banners. The cost of the banners was covered by the biennial so that the participants didn’t to worry about the financial side of it. The banner sizes was given in line with the size of the railings in the building as Ayse planned to hang the banners next to each other on the railings of the famous ramp way in the biennial venue –a building by Oscar Niemeyer-, all over the vault to convert the neutral exhibition space into a square, a stadium or a gathering place, where people congregate and hang/hold their banners to demand or protest. Relating the exhibition space directly to the Santana favela, and voicing the demands, desires, reactions,

7 Claire Bishop, “Participation And Spectacle: Where Are We Now?”, *Living As Form, Socially Engaged Art From 1991 – 2011*, Edited by Nato Thompson, 2012, Creative Time Books New York, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England. Pg. 39

⁸ Ibid. 40-41

complaints, advertisements or whatever the favela residents want to express, the artist opens up a space for them, for the ones who are ignored, disregarded and avoided. She created a 'spectacular' installation in the vault area –embodiment of relational aesthetics with form-, aiming to elevate the expressive power –through the messages and visuality- of the Santana favela people, who occupies the lowest of strata in the society, to the place of the highest strata. Furthermore, the participants, their friends and relatives were excited to see the work and the exhibition, which means the opening up of the biennial to the commons. However, although it was agreed and even highly appreciated by the chief curator of the exhibition – even the photograph of it, showing it at a much smaller scale at the vault area was printed in the catalogue-, just before the opening, the banners were taken away by the biennial and we were informed that it is visually disturbing Vanessa Beecroft's opening performance – a spectacle that she realizes with beautiful naked models. For the work, we found another place in the café area -a circulation place- and the chief curator accepted this proposal. However, later on we understood that the president was reacted against having the favela banners inside of the exhibition space, so, we were asked to install the banners outdoors. We rejected the offer -of throwing the favela back again out- and Ayse withdrew her work.

{Hirschhorn 1 visual} Thomas Hirschhorn's projects like the "Bataille Monument" (2002) or "Spinoza Festival" (2009) work in the same manner: he puts the specific issues of an immigrant community into the hearth of the society through locating it at larger spectacular contexts like the Documenta 11 (2002) or the Spinoza Festival (2009). {Polder Cup, 3 visuals} Another strategy can be exemplified by Maider Lopez's projects like the "Ataskoa" (2005) or "Polder Cup" (2010), which bring together members of diverse communities, groups, networks, classes, ages and genders around common trivial topics like traffic jam or football. Through the participants and spectacular temporary forms she created, such projects end up usually in spectacular events.

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