

İSTANBUL UNDER THE CHANGING SKIES

Today, all codes, values and criteria have collapsed. The icons of the old world as well as of the new order have been crashed. Demolition of the monument of Buddha by the Taliban was followed by the abolition of Mir, the space station which hosted the first human astronauts and which can be preserved in the space as a record in the history of technology. The first iconoclasm refers to the devaluation of faith while the second one, of the Utopia. On the 11th of September came the most tragic one; the destruction of the World Trade Center Towers and the Pentagon. It is the most tragic as it incurs death of the innocent people both from the USA and afterwards from Afghanistan. This last iconoclasm denotes the vulnerability of the hyper-powers of the economic globalization and its bodyguard, the military. It may also be considered as a rebel against the domineering, suppressive, techno-positivist discourse of the high capitalism. Just after the suicide airplane attacks, the former terror specialist of the FBI defined the attacks on TV as “High concept, low technology”. In other words, more thought, less consumption. Queer enough, the counter-discourse against the high capitalism or civilization of technology was formulized again by the USA herself.

The shock waves that the 11th of September caused have been shaking the stock exchange markets all over the world. While it is accelerating the already existing economic crises in the underdeveloped and third-world countries, it also creates new ones. This hyper fragility of the economic stability all over the world openly points out the weakness of the system of economic globalization. Under the disguise of the warriors of liberty against Terrorism, global powers and their followers like Turkey came together in an interest relationship to open up new resources for themselves killing the downtrodden Afghani civil people. Likewise, this aggressive revenge and interest war against Afghanistan and the seeming reluctance or negligence in finding peaceful solutions demonstrates a need for urgent revisions in the culture and identity politics of globalization.

The story of Turkey’s integration to the global economy started with a military coup d’etat in the early 80’s. With the process of globalization, İstanbul has been going through a series of drastic cultural, social, economic and urban transformations. After the oppressive coup d’etat, a liberal economic model was adopted and there began a campaign for establishing the necessary infrastructure -new sectors for specialized services and finance- to meet the basic conditions of economic globalization and also for large scale urban projects as an integral part

of this process. Mid 80's witnessed the radical urban renewal projects like planning and construction of a second bridge over the Bosphorus, new highways and boulevards, an underground metro, a second international airport and new docks & ports on the Asian coast initiated by the government and municipalities to prepare İstanbul to become a "global city". In addition to all these structural renewals, the best locations of the city were spared for the five star multinational hotel chains (like the Ritz, Kempinsky, Carlton and etc) in the expectation of accommodating "world elites" and entrepreneurs of the global capital. Gigantic shopping malls, fashion designer boutiques, clubs for world musics, specialty restaurants, chic streetcafes, gourmet shops, etc. followed to fulfill the emerging demands created by the new life styles of the citizens of the desired global city.

The undesired majority of the ever-increasing population of İstanbul also took their part in those hasty preparations by creating new shanty towns as alternative habitats and life styles. Mostly illegal, shanty towns have been emerging and extending their circumferences in the hearth of the most elite districts, at the back of highways, in the midst of the skyscrapers or on the hills of the Bosphorous in addition to the already existing ones located near to the industrial zones. To refer to the practicality and quickness of their construction, the shanty towns are called "Gecekondu" (Nightlanded) in Turkish. In addition to what its name implies, with the diversity and variety of materials and methods that these Gecekondus were built and with the resulting, unrecognizable architectural notes of which they consist, they recall spaceships landed at nights.

Not only the Gecekondus are illegally built in İstanbul. One of the prestige buildings in the very center of the city, "Gökkafes" (Skycage), which hosts the top multinational companies, the Ritz Hotel for one, is actually an illegal construction; an edifice of corruption and the Mafia relationships. Another prestige building in the city, the Feshane, which was renovated by Gai Aulenti for the very first contemporary art museum in İstanbul in 1992 (the 3rd İstanbul Biennial under the direction of Vasıf Kortun took place there) has also a curious but whimsical story. Because of a conflict between the İstanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts (the organizing body of the İstanbul Biennials and the initiator of the museum project) and the radical Islamist municipality of the time, the museum project was first postponed and then cancelled. Now, despite of its architectural properties which are suitable for exhibition purposes, it is used for the traditional Ramadan (religious feast for Muslims) night entertainment which are very similar to vaudevilles. İstanbul houses countless similar curious,

hybrid combinations and conflicts at many levels, in almost every field; from economy to the politics, from religious to legal issues, from architecture to urbanism, from pop music to the traditional forms of cultural productions...

Though all these transformations, activities and preparations did not lead to the transformation of İstanbul into a 'global city', they, however, initiated a new context for art. İstanbul Biennial was born in 1987 as one of the most crucial results on the art world of the common desire to transform İstanbul into a "global city".

In a city where there were no contemporary art museums and quite a limited number of international shows exist, furthermore, where the art institutions like the academies and universities resisted to change and fell behind the contemporary world; very limited number of galleries promoting contemporary art, the İstanbul Biennials had to function in multiple ways to compensate this lack. In this sense, the İstanbul Biennials have had an enormous impact on the formation of the new artistic context in İstanbul by creating a laboratory for the ever-emerging tendencies in the contemporary art, a multi-lingual platform for a critical dialogue between the artists from all over the world and the İstanbul art milieu, and a global network for artists, curators, critics and art professionals. Henceforth, the İstanbul art world has undergone a series of transformations adopting themselves to the emerging art context.

Representing the three generations of artistic production appeared in the new context, the artists participating to the İstanbul section of the "Metropolitan Iconographies" reflect on these multi-faceted -cultural, socio-economic, urban, architectural and aesthetic-transformations that the city of İstanbul has been going through. Ayşe Erkmen together with Kemal Önsoy represent the first generation while Kutlug Ataman, the second, Haluk Akakçe and Ebru Özseçen, the third generation artists. They not only use diverse media, new technologies like video and animation as well as the more traditional ones like painting and sculpture to create their works but, also reinterpret them in the contemporary context. While Erkmen's and Ataman's projects unfold the present structures and situations and the work of Önsoy bridges the past to the future, the works of Özseçen and Akakçe project towards the future.

Mostly employing ready-made images, Ayşe Erkmen facilitates public spaces to create her projects. The "Hohentwiel" project, she realized in Singen, Germany in 2000, exemplifies this

fact. She borrowed an elephant image from an image bank to use it in the billboards and sign boards of the city to refer to a hill called “Hohentwiel” as well as to the hidden elephant image in a drawing by the “Little Prince” of Saint-Exupéry in which an elephant swollen by a snake is depicted. Thus, the ready-made image as an empty signifier became the signifier of the hidden elephant in the hill. In the “Shipped Ships” (2001), a public transportation project, on the other hand, she points to the issues of mobility, multi-culturalism and globalization while she continues to play with the idea of signification. Three ships from İstanbul, Shingu and Venice were shipped to the Main River in Frankfurt to make scheduled trips between the two sides of Main for a month. Having enjoyed their trips, for instance, in the İstanbul City Lines boat which was put into their service by the extreme possibilities of globalization, the audience or passengers had the opportunity to reflect on the subtle irony behind it. Ayşe Erkmen contributed to the “Metropolitan Iconographies” with a more socio-politically connoted project that relates the exhibition hall to a favela (shanty town) in the Santana region of Sao Paulo. Her project consists of hand-made banners produced by a lady living in the Santana favela, carrying the messages of the inhabitants of this district. The banners are planned to be hung on the railings of the ramp way, all over the vault to convert the neutral exhibition space into an urban setting, a stadium. Voicing the demands, desires, complaints, advertisements or whatever the favela people want to express, Erkmen opens up a space for the ones who are ignored, disregarded, even avoided. In such a period that the socio-economic disparities have been even furthered to its limits by the process of economic globalization, Erkmen’s project proposes a political stand as well as a visual hybridity.

Kutlug Ataman is a film-maker but a transgressive one in the sense that he crosses the borders between the disciplines and genres as exemplified in his “semiha b. unplugged” (1997), “Women Who Wear Wigs” (1999) and the most recent work entitled “Never my Soul”(2001). In his video works, he challenges the already existing structures to search for the new possibilities of expression that the medium can convey. From a retrospective point of view, the first two works led to the “Never My Soul” which took part in this exhibition. In the “semiha b. unplugged” while he portrays the most peculiar features of the personal history of the most notorious 91 year old Turkish opera diva Semiha Berksoy, he is also delivering the socio-political history of the Turkish Republic. In the WWW, on the other hand, Ataman chose four women to interview, who wear wigs for different reasons, yet, for the same purpose; altering their identities. After this social commentary on the female identity of diverse backgrounds including a Muslim university student and a political activist transsexual,

in the “Never My Soul”, Kutlug Ataman endeavors to create a film on a Turkish transvestite living in Lausanne, Ceyhan Firat. This work has a complex and sophisticated structure; a film inside a film. While it shows the preparations and shooting of a typical melodramatic Turkish film marinated in the porno genre, certain parts of the melodrama also partake in it. As he did in his previous works, Ataman, behind the camera, invisible but audible to the audience interviews with her. From time to time, the subtle line between the melodrama and documentary disappears and a hybrid genre in between documentary, interview and fiction emerges, unfolding the marginal identity of Ceyhan Firat on the socio-political levels.

Creating abstract paintings with conceptual references to the genetic researches, microbiology and space studies as well, Kemal Önsoy opens up the way for his sculptures as a three dimensional continuation of his paintings. His paintings and sculptures mostly accompanied by a poetic text written by him, can be considered as the revitalization of the both media in today’s context. The “Come and cry from my eyes” (2001), a monumental sculpture which took part in this exhibition, exemplifies his research on this medium. The sculpture has an extremely pure and simple structure. It is originally designed for a height of 15 meters, however, as it consists of Lego type of units which are inserted on top of each other, it has a very flexible height that can be adopted to any space. Though it has a monumental scale, its weight is surprisingly low because of the Styrofoam plates that he facilitates for this work without any paint, coating or intervention. The idea of creating a helix form comes originally from the orbital movement of the water molecules which made the very first life possible on earth. With its size and proportions, it refers to staircases in the minarets of the mosques which spread all over the city. Being intertwined with the skyscrapers, the minarets, the celestial announcement towers, offer an astonishing skyline in İstanbul. After the earthquake disaster of the August 1999 at which thousands of people died also because of the lack of fire escape staircases in the buildings, he combined the idea of fire escape staircase with the ones in the minarets. Both references points to a survival; while the minaret staircase relates to the celestial survival, the latter points to an worldly one. With its white color and the spiral form which suggests a continuous ascendance and a metaphysical purification, it forms a passage that carries the humanity into the future.

Having also an architectural background, Ebru Özseçen created various projects related to architecture and urban spaces. The “Beyoglu Work” (2001) is a façade project which was designed for the historical building of the renown Elhamra Passage in one of the most lively

cultural and entertainment centers of İstanbul. As it consisted of fluid, voluptuous and gigantic forms in the same color and texture of the building, applied on the banisters of balconies, it embedded a sensuous and reverie-like aura into the historical architecture of Elhamra. Hence, she grants the passer-bys such a perceptual experience that the dichotomies between the public and private, dream and reality may be reconciled. Ebru Özseçen adapts to a vast range of different media, distilling from them unique visual possibilities, which can be exemplified in her DVD projection, the “City” (2000). She contributed to the “Metropolitan Iconographies” also with this work in which she created a scienfictive, gloomy city image featuring close-up images of Electronica, a historical computer from the early 70’s in the technology museum in Lisbon. Thus, in the “City”, she brings together the two inevitable structures in our lives; the urban and the communication. The partly out of focus images suggest an aerial view of an urban texture. The blocks of rectangular and round forms of chips and circuits with the shinny metal parts imply architectural units as well as industrial and technological plantations while the corridors between them together with the cables and cords proposes streets, highways, bridges and the like. Now and then, the focus of the camera allows to recognize the details of the Electronica, repeating an emotional tide of remembrance and forgetting. It not only proposes a futuristic image of a city that can be seen in the films like the “Brazil” or “ Blade Runner”, but with its rigid format created by the mirror images, it also refers to the ancient tyrannical cities, temples and shrines.

Reinterpreting diverse media like drawing, painting, mural, live video, computer animation and installation, Haluk Akakçe creates visual reflections projecting towards the future in an emotional, melancholic, and simultaneously, critical way. In his DVD projection, “The Measure of All Things” 2000, he comments on the mutilated relation between the Nature and the civilization of technology while criticizing the techno-positivist futuristic fantasies. The work visualizes a futuristic –might be even considered as contemporary- cyber love story and Nativity scene, articulating computer animation with live video in an aesthetically designed style. The revolutionary urge in the oeuvre of Akakçe led him to create dreamy interiors, unfolding his elegant paintings and drawings tinted with his psychedelic revisited Art Nouva style in the space. Having converted the gallery space into a walk-in painting, in the “Untitled” (2001), he created an interior in the Deitch Projects, NY. Akakçe intervenes with the very balance of the architecture that he renders a site-specific “painting” which transforms the total experience of the space, so, a different state of consciousness emerges. Since he breaks with the conventional canons of painting as an object for the gaze of the viewer, he

proposes an alternative relationship between the “painting” as an enveloping space and the audience, also as a buyer. The issue of ownership becomes more complicated as the audience becomes a part of the painting as a moving figure in it. He contributed to the exhibition with a new interior project in which he planned to create a formless “painting” combined with moving images and special light effects. The images facing each other will be in a dialogue and, here and there, will be completed unexpectedly with the projected ones, altering the existing definition of the space. The dimly lit space, while transforming the perceptual experience of the viewer, will also allow the interaction with the audience that casts ghostly shadows, changing as the people moves around in the “painting”. Thus, the work will reflect the chaotic as well as the unpredictable nature of urban life.

N. Fulya Erdemci

İstanbul / November 2001