

The Accidental Viewer; Their Boundaries Broken, Art, Life and Space Fuses to ONE

Seeking for Poetic Justice :

Untitled (2003), Installation by Mike Nelson

Introduction

Mike Nelson's installation *Untitled* (2003) took place at the Eight International Istanbul Biennial. Held since 1987, the Istanbul Biennial is now recognized as among the most celebrated after Venice and Sao Paulo Biennials.

The thematic framework of the Eight International Istanbul Biennial in 2003, where Nelson's installation took place, was 'Poetic Justice'. The curator was Dan Cameron of the New Museum of Contemporary Art of New York. Throughout the Biennial, panel discussions were held on subjects of *Art and Societies in Transition*, *Distributive Justice*, *Justice and the Creative Act*, *New Countries-New Identity-New Art*, *The Geopolitics of Culture and Radical Poetics*, with the participation of both local and foreign art critics, artists and academics. The conceptual framework, Poetic Justice, pointed to the significance of the relation of art to the practice and philosophy of justice in general. In practice, in the experience of the Istanbul Biennial, it underlined the fact that art can function for the city's

population as a democratizing and contributing element of life. Dan Cameron explained his choice for this concept by way of pointing to the contradictions of globalization, a mono cultural phenomenon, and the need for diversity of local responses and individual artists' own expressions of art and justice.

The Istanbul Biennial has emphasized how works of art projects, working together with the social character of the city space, can engage and have impact on the lives of the citizens as well. *Nelson's work, we believe, was the most important work of the Biennial serving this end. The occupants of the natural habitat of the location of his work were not only part of the work itself, but became viewers as well, maybe unintentionally. As a project that blended the site to the work, it was also an invitation and a challenge for the art seekers looking for the space through the labyrinths of the streets of the Old City, to become a viewer of not only the work itself, but to witness social and cultural diversity.*



Eminönü tram station in the Old District



roads leading to Valide Han



labyrinthine roads leading to Valide Han



labyrinthine roads leading to Valide Han



labyrinthine roads leading to Valide Han



local shop



labyrinthine roads leading to Valide Han

Streets & Surroundings:

Istanbul is a metropolitan city situated on two sides of the Istanbul Bosphorous, the waterway that separates Europe and Asia. As Constantinople, the capital of the Byzantine Empire and as Istanbul, the capital of the Ottoman Empire since 1453, it embodies layers of history and heritage fused into each other. The city has been an opening gate for long-distance trade and commerce during its entire history and is also the site of monumental structures that stand as signifiers of this past. Presently, located in the Old District, this past comes together as cultural diversity and as encounters of several kinds, mainly for reasons of global and local commerce and trade, flexible small scale manufacture, heritage tourism, and residential occupancy.



local shop



Hans (The historic commercial centers and inns) of Istanbul



Hans (The historic commercial centers and inns) of Istanbul

"The inclusion of the public connects theories of art to the broader population: what exist in the space between the words public and art is an unknown relationship between artist and the audience, a relationship that may itself become the artwork."

Lacy, Suzanna, "Cultural Pilgrimages and Metaphoric Journeys", in Lacy, Suzanna, (ed.) *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, Bay Press, Seattle, Washington, 1995, p. 20

"When an object enters the real world, it must function in the real world."

Branson Michael, *Culture in Action: A Public program of Sculpture* Chicago curated by Mary Jane Jacob, Bay Press, Seattle, 1995, p. 44

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The Site:

Mike Nelson's installation *Untitled* (2003) took place in an old gilding atelier in one of the rooms of an historical building, Büyük Valide Han. Built in the 17th century to house three-hundred rooms, this building is 98 by 168 meters long, has two levels and three courtyards, and is located within the busiest, crowded section of the Old City. Quite similar to its original purpose, built as a commercial building for long-distance and local commerce and trade and as an inn, it still houses several shops and small-scale flexible production. The building has not gone through a major renovation but there are ad hoc additions of cheap materials to make them functional at the expense of its visual and historical presentation. Its location, in the midst of a labyrinth-like streets and surroundings, makes getting there, and finding the room of the exhibition an adventure and also a significant part of the process of Nelson's work's presence.



the courtyard



a textile atelier in Valide Han



the domes of Valide Han as seen from the roof



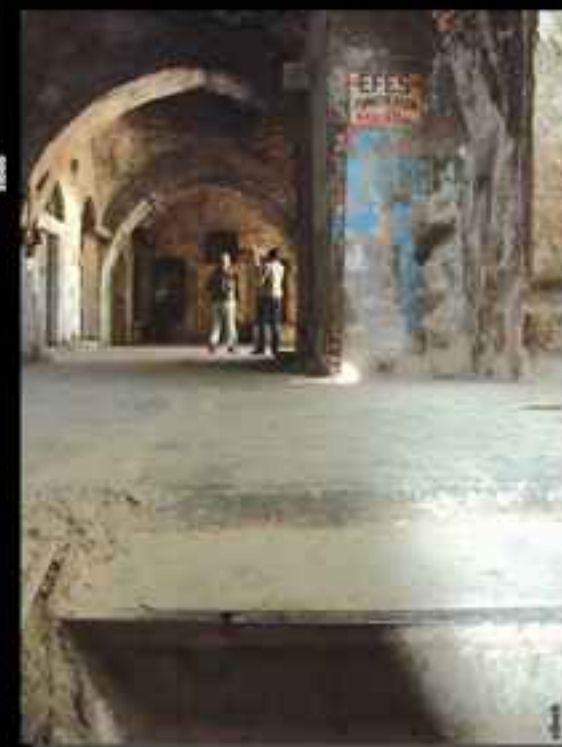
the door to and the sign for viewers of Nelson's work with directions to find the guide for the key



view from the roof



a textile atelier in Valide Han



inside the corridors of Valide Han



An atelier in Valide Han and Mehdi, the guide to Nelson's room as well as a labourer of Valide Han



the door (large & small) opening to Valide Han



the courtyard of Valide Han, as seen from the roof

"Art should not help people become assimilated in the existing society, but at each turn should challenge the assumptions of that society, whether through the demands of intellectual and visual rigor and/or the heightened recognition of pleasure and pain."

Becker, Carol, *The Subversive Imagination: Artists, Society, and Responsibility*, New York, Routledge, 1994 p:119-120



inside the corridors of Valide Han



the work in preparation



the work in preparation



the work in preparation



the work



the work



the work in preparation



the work



the work



the work



note to Nelson by a viewer who took a photograph with him on leaving. (A common act which turns the work into an ongoing effect for the viewers.)

The Work:

The work consisted of a two level photographer's darkroom in which photographs were drying on ropes. These were pictures taken from different corners of the building and of the neighbourhood, and several viewers took some of them as they left, some leaving notes and other objects in return. A man working within the building, Mehdi, held the key to the room and informally became a guide, taking visitors for an overview of the city from over the roof, thus becoming a part of the process itself. The artist chose this space as his venue after searching for one suitable for his purposes from across the city. The work was impressive, witty, and, was politically significant. It brought together groups of people, namely the art goers and the local workers and merchants, and made them engage with each other and their surroundings through access to the work.

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