

MINIMUM MONUMENT

Itinerancy and nomadism – The experience report

Since 2001, my work with interventions in public spaces has been developed in different cities and countries. Hundreds or perhaps thousands of small ice figures of men and women, around 20 cm (8 ") tall, are taken to central locations of the cities and placed to melt by the passers-by. This action is named Minimum Monument and refers to the concept of monument in a critical way – it represents the anti-monument.

Searching conciliation between the public and private scope, the subjective self and the city, has been the motivation of my work. In this search I found the synthesis of my uneasiness in the public monuments, that is a historical celebration very distant from the ordinary individual. So I subverted, one by one, the characteristics of the official monument that referred to the power. In its minimum scale there are neither pedestals nor hierarchy. Homage is addressed to the anonymous and the bodies fade away in a shared experience. Its remembrance is kept by the individual who saw them and registered them in photographs and videos.

I travelled many cities: Campinas, São Paulo, Brasília, Salvador and Curitiba in Brazil. Then Havana-Cuba, México City, Tokyo and Kyoto in Japan. I learned about their history and placed anonymously small ice sculptures carried in a thermal bag in historically and architecturally important locations or in locations with large number of people passing by and also photographing the process. There was a meaningful response from people then. In Tokyo, for instance, a lady at the grocery market in Ueno, gets nervous seeing the sculptures melting and asks to take them away on a tray. An officer asks permission to place the figure up on an acrylic cone as on a pedestal. In Salvador, Brazil, a boy grabs a sculpture and not satisfied with only touching it, he puts it in his mouth to taste its flavor. They were anonymous and absolutely solitary actions.

from the individual to the collective

From 2005 on, the anonymous and solitary actions become collective – almost 300 sculptures are placed to melt on Sé Square, the most central location in São Paulo, São Paulo's Ground Zero.¹

The number of sculptures increases up to one thousand and two hundreds on the interventions that follow. By then, instead of travelling through the cities I seek the center that is their foundation or politically, socially and historically important locations. The stairway of L'Opera in Paris. In Braunschweig, the Burgplatz, the medieval square that houses the oldest sculpture in Northern Europe. In the city of Porto in Portugal, Dom João I Square. In Ribeirão Preto, in Brazil, Carlos Gomes Square. In Florence, in Italy, on the Renaissance's Piazza Della Santissima Annunziata and in Berlin on Gendarmenmarket Square.

¹ The intervention on Sé Square was carried out on April 7th, 2005 in Body, Time, Art sponsored by Sesc – Carmo SP

The collective dimension does not reach only the sculptures, but their production and arrangement as well. At the second stage, it is necessary to produce, pack, transport and place the large number of sculptures rapidly. The public, previously just viewers, are now invited to help place the sculptures participating actively of the monument construction.

Because of the collective dimension, the melting experience becomes powerful and actually causes a momentary poetic suspension of the daily life in the city. The action is no longer anonymous. It is greatly covered by the media. Newspapers and TV are now interested in the event.

the challenge of space in different cities

New challenges on space and human relations are faced by Minimum Monument in every city we are invited to participate. Because of the handmade, daily and repetitive production of sculptures we need to stay longer in the cities. In the city of Porto in Portugal², for example, we were invited by the Porto Puppet Festival in September 2006. It is an annual art event with theater; dancing, music and art historically hold by Rivoli Theater and managed by Department of Culture till that year. However it would be privatized in 2007. There was a movement against privatization of the theater then.

Living in the city of Porto for ten days during the production of one thousand sculptures offered us the opportunity to know and work with the locals. Mr. Joaquim Teixeira, owner of Gelinho (Icy) Fish Store gently let us work in his shop. The sculptures were produced in the back room that was transformed into a studio attracting the neighbors and the clients. It was fish and live art together.

Mr. Teixeira gave us the keys of the shop in order to ease the process and was involved with it himself: he brought 20 polystyrene boxes to transport the sculptures, helped packing and video taped.

The intervention was amazing. More than 500 people tried to find a place where to put 1000 sculptures on the stairways of Dom João I Square in front of Rivoli Theater. The L-shaped stairways covered with small sculptures gave monumentality to the work. Minimum Monument recovers a monumental scale of traditional monuments through the repetition of minimum besides joining the cause against the privatization of Rivoli Theater.

It was very important to carry on the intervention in Portugal because of its symbolic ancestral value. It was like taking the way back, carrying the luggage of Portuguese colonization. It was like leaving Brazil loaded with the centuries, the heritage, the miscegenation and taking overseas a work founded in the precarious and the ephemeral.

In Florence, Italy, we needed an effective political support during the twenty previous days of the intervention that would take place on October 21st 2008.

² 2 Other intervention were:

- 1- Paris at Place de L'Opéra and Mairie du 9^{ème} on June 30th 2005 invited by Galeria Sycomore Art Galery,
- 2- Municipal Theater in São Paulo on November 19th 2005 as part of Virada Cultural by Culture Municipal Department
- 3- Bhausnschweig Germany on June 15th 2005 along with Linha Imaginária Group (Imaginary Line) .
- 4- Ribeirão Preto, Praça Carlos, Brazil on September 22nd 2007 , invited by Sesc Ribeirão Preto.

I was invited by a small cultural project company – Acquarius Agency. Minimum Monument intervention was scheduled and authorized to take place on the Piazza della Segnoria. We had the Quartiere 1 chief's written permission and also his support but it did not guarantee the intervention to happen.

When I arrived in Florence on October 1st, the president of the Culture Commissione was trying to obtain the intervention clearance from the City Council Chamber. There was also a promise that I would be able to produce the ice sculptures at the Fine-Arts Academy. Due to the fact we did not have the authorization confirmed; the funds for accommodation, meals and production of the sculptures were not released by the sponsor bank.

We had meetings, contacted other companies, and looked for other places where to install the freezers for nine days. It was a strenuous struggle. And yet, the director of the Fine-Arts Academy did not allow us to produce the sculptures in its facilities, as he had promised, and the bank cancelled the sponsorship despite the signed contract. We had to cover our accommodation, meals and transportation expenses. Luckily, the four freezers used to keep the sculptures were free of charge because the supplier company was very thoughtful and supportive to the project.

Eventually, everything was settled with the president of the Communi, Mr. Estefano Marmuji in a meeting on 9th: the ice would be produced in the Albergo Popolare Centro La Fenice facilities on 35, Via Del Leone and there would be a photographic exhibition at the former Muratte della Piazza Madona della Neve. The location of the intervention would be the Piazza della Santissima Annunziata on October 21st at 13:00.

The Albergo Popolare La Fênice used to be a convent and is almost one block sized. They attend and shelter people in need like former drug users, alcoholics, convicts, and homeless immigrants, in other terms anyone that is apart from society. We started by the edges...

Coincidentally on 21out, the day of the intervention, there was a huge protest against Italian public school privatization. The streets of Florence were crowded and 40.000 people were gathered at the Piazza della Santissima Annunziata at the very moment of the intervention. The protesters assumed the intervention as part of their claims and placed 1,200 sculptures on the stairways of the Istituto degli Innocenti saying: "This is what is happening to education in Italy. It is disappearing."

All the local press watched the historical contrast of small sitting figures melting on the stairways of an Italian Renaissance building by Brunelleschi – the metaphor of the melting of men and their institutions – the images were worldwide spread. La República newspaper reported the "Manifestazione" with the headline: *Finale poético (e amaro) com gli omini di ghiaccio* – The poetical but bitter end of ice men.

The images circulated on Internet. They were called the "army of melting men" or just "melting men" and understood as an alerting work to the climate changing. Because of the nearness of my work to this theme, I was invited to do an intervention in Berlin on Gendarmenmarkt Square on September 2nd 2009 as part of the events organized by WWF in an attempt to get people aware of climate changing effects on the planet.

From its beginning, Minimum Monument has been developed as a counterpoint to the monument and from that was driven to understand and discuss the problems of cities, since the monument itself is essentially urban, and the individual's body. The individual that constructs the city and is its moving body.

Nevertheless it is in the middle of an urgent issue, the global warming and the resulting climate changes. The resemblance is clear and I think it can be seen as a "live monument" of contemporary issues.

On one hand, it is really rewarding to have an art work being called out by other segments of the society in order to perform for what is happening here and now. But on the other hand, a bit of distress disturbs me: how could the work be part of the city life but not connected to climate issues? What is the "vicious appropriation" of the work by the propaganda like? What can the artist do to prevent their work from being "swallowed"? Those questions were considered during the ten days taken to produce 1,000 sculptures at the Bildhauerwerkstatt im Kulturwerk des bbk berlin GmbH studio, on 102 Osloer Straße in Berlin. So I decided to tell the public the real nature of my work on the day of the intervention. In Florence, the work was a matter of rite and sacrifice but in Berlin, I was concerned with ethical loyalty – I was on the razor's edge.

The 1000 sculptures were taken to the Gendarmenmarket Square at noon, inside two freezers. People were invited to build the monument. At first, there was a well organized line to pick up the sculptures, but then, with the ice melting quickly everything was rather chaotic. The stairways of the Konzerthaus (Concert House) were covered by sculptures and people, mainly children who were sitting near "their sculptures" of take care of the melting.

At the same time the Third World Climate Conference was being held in Geneva and because the climate problem is not a local issue, the intervention in Berlin drew media's attention. Big news agencies like Reuters and BBC were on Gendarmenmarket Square at noon. They were impressed with the interaction between the public and the work and also with the metaphor of the sculptures melting. The TV stations showed the event, asked for interviews. A host of the agencies photographers together with the public tried to capture the images of the melting.

basic concepts of the work

The research that drives the theoretical work and supports the urban interventions are the public monuments. We know that one of the characteristics of a monument is to be built by the established power to honor their accomplishments as a kind of registration of the official history. Since every power or victory carries the defeat and the oppression suffered by both the dominated or the defeated, the monuments in their honor also embody that contradiction and are called "monuments of barbarity" by Walter Benjamin" (Benjamin, 1994, p. 225).

brief history of monument

In a nutshell, the origin of the monument – *momentu monere* – to remind, is etymologically connected to mausoleum, tomb.

Therefore, the monument has a mortuary origin. Régis Debray says that “the grave of great people were our first museums and the dead people our first collectors” (Debray,1993,p.22). That is evident in history by how ancient peoples related with their ancestors and with the invisible – a phenomenon that considered death as the generator of artistic manifestations.

Hence funerary art was the link between the visible and the invisible worlds. The image created from it had a kind of mediator function between the living and the dead, between human beings and gods.

The word image derives from the Latin *imago*, the name of wax mold that the Romans used to make from dead people’s face. Those molds were taken from the funeral to the home of the dead, in a way to turn the absent into present. The image enabled the apprehension of the dead by the living, transforming the perishable into eternal. The representation carried the soul of the represented and was not reached by the decomposition of death.

Our civilization can not understand easily the importance of the eternity reached by that representation once the trace of death has practically vanished in our society ; fact that turns us almost barbarians according to Debray (1993, p.27)

A process of distance from death starts during XVIIIth century in the West and it grows up with the strengthening of capitalism in the productivist society.

The logic of production, efficiency and profit increase gradually, and proportionally the practice of funerary rites are impoverished separating completely the living from the dead, since the dead do not produce wealth. We then have death completely apart from life.

sculpture and interventions in the public space – contextualization

Sculpture understanding is greatly transformed after the 60’s what generates a lot of dissatisfaction with indoors and protected exhibitions. Such dissatisfaction drove artists to public spaces in the 80’s; the so called Urban Intervention. The concept of sculpture aiming commemorative tribute and pedestal had already started to wear out at the end of XIXth century. Sculpture is then stretched away, abandoning the form, material and themes used in the past.

Even though neutrality has been used as urban design, the public space is neither smooth nor neutral. Political, economical and marketing aspects are implied, ergo any sculpture placed there relates to the surroundings in different ways that is agreement, adhesion or friction, etc.

Regarding to neutrality, Richard Sennet argues that the emergence of Protestantism is connected to a modern view of the urban planner who designs a neutral, sterile environment, expressed both in materials used as the planning of all.

The compulsive neutralization of surroundings is partly deep-rooted in ancient unhappiness, the fear of pleasure that drove people to have their surroundings as neutral as possible. The modern urbanist is trapped into the protestant ethic of space...thus neutrality becomes an instrument of power as well.

Interventions in urban space have discussed and clarified those relations since the 80's, bringing out the disagreement and the criticism that are part of the social structure itself. That new kind of work in public spaces also gathers the previous experiences taken from pop art movement, installations, land art, architecture, urbanism and other types of sociological, participatory, and scenic experience. Therefore different from the concept of decorating cities with sculptures on pedestals in the middle of squares as homage that was spread out from XVIII th century. (Site, 1992, p.14 to 33).

Understanding sculpture beyond the tridimensional object deeply committed to its place or where it performs was also intensively explored and labored in Joseph Beuys' work. His extended concept of art leads to what he named social sculpture – an original art category which assigns the sculptor the task of analyzing the social structures.

In that context, a square, a public building, a garden or a monument are the elements of the city aesthetic philosophy and the signals of dominant ideology as well. According to Madrueolo, the “public art” commitment with the city *“is not as much in generating those kinds of ideological signals as pretending to be a reflection of the social activity of the city. [...] it must confer the context social and aesthetical meanings besides being communicative and functional”* (Madrueolo,1992, p.73).

Attempting to clarify more complex relations of social structures, urban interventions were intensified in different cities around the world in the late 90's. Artists, both individually or collectively, “think and inhabit” cities in different ways. As far as I am concern, among other reasons those actions reflect a deep research in order to build a new public space once we have lost the traditional public space and consequently translated into a legitimate search of citizenship. In Brazil, no nostalgia for a never reached citizenship but on the contrary, supporting actions that can open a gap for other pathos of coexistence.

open process

Eventually, Minimum Monument is within those urban actions carried out by artists/activists that seek a new attitude in different cities and countries, attempting to open new ways to inhabit the world. It is an “in

process” and “in motion” work, stretched in time and space. And even though ephemeral when travelling along cities in several countries, it is registered, earns monumentality and adds meaning.

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Other ephemeral intervention works: **Glory to all inglorious fights**, at Pátio do Colégio in São Paulo, Brazil in May 2007, **You walked on the stars absent minded**, at the hall of Sesc Pompéia – SP in August/ 2007, **Landscape/Poem** on the windows of Adelpha Menezes Municipal Library in September]2006, **Invented Reality** on the glass windows of Sesc/Vila Mariana in November 2008 can be logged in here: www.neleazevedo.com.br

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