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**The Street as Art's Memory Place**

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## **The Street as Art's Memory Place**

**Lütfiye Bozdog**

### **Abstract**

The street belongs to everyone ... It is where people congregate and where daily life goes on... Where mutual life is exhibited, where people take shelter together, where all of life is displayed and the most effective communication area... The only public area where people experience freedom of speech and assembly, and use that freedom for protest and criticism.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the attempts by the people to show their discontent in every possible way caused art to move into public areas and to become part of the protest; because art is resistance, art is rebellion and because art shows a desire to destroy existing concepts and to replace them with new ones. The suffering classes held down by wars, by unjust governments, and by the monopolistic era of capitalism have found the expression of revolt through art. Street art is the art of rebellion. However, it is risky to create art in forbidden areas. It is illegal - because it occupies a public area without permission. It is risky – because street art grows from opposition. It is anti authority or the “official” art that manipulates public areas and together with vandalism and rebellious activities is an underground art form.

While destroying the elitist walls of art and denying the boundaries, street art also offends the law by occupying public areas without permission. Therefore, it is an illegal art activity and needs to be performed in privacy. Most street art activists have political expressions too, and while they lead normal lives during the day, they perform their secret activities under the cover of darkness. The street is a platform and a means, especially for young activists from different backgrounds and occupational groups and anyone else interested in expressing their ideas through art.

However, monopolistic capitalism has been gradually separating the streets and squares from the public and privatizing them. Foucault states: "In the modern society, domination works continuously and in silence." Today, domination continues with the total control of public areas, which are the only suitable places for young activists seeking freedom. Day after day, streets and squares are separated from the public and privatized and the authentic relationship that had been established between the city and public is removed. Privatization implementations with rapidly developing spatial deployments reduce public places day by day.

Despite all the prohibitions and domination and despite disordered and irregular production, the art performed in restricted areas is a delightful platform freed of creative borders.

This paper aims to emphasize the importance of the revolutionary and creative power of street art with reference to the Taksim Gezi Park protests in Istanbul in 2013.

**Keywords:** Street Art, Unrestricted Creativity, Art's Memory Place

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## Introduction

Street Art is a form of sub-cultural activity that is defined as unsanctioned visual art practiced in public spaces.

### *What is Public Space?*

A public space is the social space that is generally open and accessible to people. Roads, public squares, parks and beaches are typically considered as public spaces. Government buildings that are open to the public, such as public libraries are also public spaces. Although not considered as a public space, privately owned buildings or properties visible from sidewalks and public thoroughfares may affect the public's visual landscape, by, for example, outdoor advertising.

*Public space "of private individuals themselves around an issue of common interest, their reasoning, they enter into a rational discussion; they create the public sphere of life."*<sup>1</sup>

(Habermas, 2010: 20)

*"Public places, like or unlike those of us contacting those that line, that defines us as a society collectively, the partners act out of life. Around here, we are all equal and we feel our home places. We also protected our freedom of speech and assembly, which are places where we can use our right to criticize the government."*<sup>2</sup>

(Kressel, 1998: 78)

According to Georg Simmel: nowadays, more of an individual wish to emphasize their distinctiveness:

*"Individuals, on the social environment in a way to attract the interest of the environment will benefit from the awareness of differences ..."*<sup>3</sup>

(Simmel, 2003: 99).

### *What is the Importance of Public Space for Artists?*

Public space has also become something of a touchstone for critical theory in relation to philosophy, (urban) geography, visual art, cultural studies, social studies and urban design. The term 'public space' is also often misconstrued to mean other things such as 'gathering place', which is an element of the larger concept of social space.

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<sup>1</sup>Habermas, Jurgen; "The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere", İletişim, İstanbul, 2010

<sup>2</sup>Kressel, Shirley, "New Democracy Newsletter", 1998, Sendika.org için Çeviren: Meriç Kırılmaz, İstanbul, 1998

<sup>3</sup>Simmel, Georg, "The conflict in modern culture", İletişim, İstanbul, 2003

In today's art world, instead of the usual art institutions like museums and galleries artists go outside, using the streets and open public areas as the venues for contemporary art to be exhibited and shared. In particular, since the 1960's, the relationship of art with politics has developed and through art shown in public areas the opposing art movements combining "art" and "everyday life" have gained importance as a language of criticism. The object of this paper is to examine the criticism embraced by the opposing art practices performed in public areas. This form of art has generally been seen as a post graffiti writing movement and is often characterized by its illegal nature.

The use of public space for artists of sub-cultures and for the struggle for rights and freedom is becoming more visible. For Foucault, today's sub-cultures that determine the dominant discourse exclusions "other" is defined as the "ends". When we look at the historical development of the public domain of slaves, women, peasants, workers or unprivileged men of various ethnic and religious groups, the "other" is seen as the areas from which they are excluded.

### **The Resistance at Taksim Gezi Park**

Following the 2010 decision of the government to build additional nuclear power plants and the Third Bosphorus Bridge, environmental issues led to continued demonstrations in Istanbul and Ankara.

The 2013–14 protests in Turkey started on 28 May 2013, initially to protest against the urban development plan for Istanbul's Taksim Gezi Park. The protests were sparked by outrage at the violent eviction of a sit-in at the park protesting the urban development plan. Subsequently, supporting protests and strikes took place across Turkey protesting a wide range of concerns, at the core of which were issues of freedom of the press, expression, and assembly, and the government's increasing encroachment on Turkey's secularism. With no centralized leadership beyond the small assembly that organized the original environmental protest, the protests have been compared to the Occupy movement and the events of May 1968. Social media played a key part in the protests, not least because much of the Turkish media downplayed the protests, particularly in the early stages. Out of the total population of Turkey, 3.50 million people are estimated to have taken an active part in almost 5,000 demonstrations across Turkey connected with the original Gezi Park protest. Eleven people were killed and more than 8,000 injured, some critically.

**Figure 1.** *Gezi Park as seen from the Marmara Hotel on Taksim Square.*



On the morning of 28 May 2013, around 50 environmentalists camped out in Gezi Park in order to prevent its demolition. The protesters initially halted attempts to bulldoze the park by refusing to leave.

### **Who is the Woman in Red?**

May 28, 2013. This woman in red became a symbol of the Turkish protest in Taksim Square, Istanbul.

A Turkish riot policeman uses tear gas as people protest against the destruction of trees in the park brought about by a pedestrian project in Taksim Square in central Istanbul.

*“In her red cotton summer dress, necklace and white bag slung over her shoulder she might have been floating across the lawn at a garden party; but before her crouches a masked policeman firing teargas spray that sends her long hair billowing upwards.*

*Endlessly shared on social media and replicated as a cartoon on posters and stickers, the image of the woman in red has become the leitmotif for female protesters during days of violent anti-government demonstrations in Istanbul.*

*In one graphic copy plastered on walls the woman appears much bigger than the policeman. "The more you spray the bigger we get", reads the slogan next to it.”(Reuters - 2013)<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/06/03/us-turkey-protests-women idUSBRE95217B20130603>

**Figure 2.** *The Iconic 'Woman in Red' Image*



An anti-government protester, wearing a Guy Fawkes mask, makes V-signs in front of a barricade during clashes in İstanbul. The mask is based on that worn by the lead character in *V for Vendetta*, Alan Moore's 1982 comic book account of an anarchist fighting against a fascist government in England.

Like Alan Moore, David Lloyd is quite pleased with the success of the mask and proud that he designed something that is useful to street politics. He is "[h]appy that a symbol of resistance to tyranny in fiction is being used as a symbol of resistance to any perceived tyranny in real life." Unlike Moore, however, he still collects his royalties for *V for Vendetta* and its merchandise.

**Figure 3.** *Protester Wearing [A Guy Fawkes](#) Mask*



The demonstrators wear Guy Fawkes masks during a protest against the demolition of Taksim Gezi Park on May 31, 2013, in the Taksim quarter of İstanbul

**Figure 4.** *Protesters Wearing “Guy Fawkes Masks”*



At night, police forces try to disperse protesters gathered at Beşiktaş district. Clashes between police and protesters continue until next morning. Beşiktaş football team supporter’s group Çarşı members hijack a bulldozer and chase police vehicles.

**Figure 5.** *A Bulldozer Later Nicknamed POMA was Hijacked by [Çarşı](#) Members and Used Against the [TOMA](#) Vehicles of the Police Forces*



**Figure 6.** *Painted by Demonstrators; Pink Bulldozer*



Standing Man/Woman protest; after the clearing of Gezi Park camp on 15 June a new type of protest developed, dubbed the "Standing Man" or "Standing Woman". A lone protester, Erdem Gündüz, initiated it on 17 June 2013 by standing in Taksim Square for hours, staring at the Turkish flags on the Ataturk



Cultural Center. The Internet widely distributed images of the protest; other people imitated the protest style and artists took up the theme. A type of dilemma action, the initial Standing Man protest soon inspired others to do the same.

**Figure 7.** *Front of [Atatürk Cultural Center](#) Covered with Banners*



**Figure 8.** *Standing Man*



**Figure 9.** *Standing Man/Woman Protests*



Gezi Park demonstrators joined thousands of gay rights activists as they marched in the 11th annual Istanbul Pride March along the iconic İstiklal Avenue. The violence from the Taksim Gezi Park uprising seemed poised to

threaten the parade in Istanbul as police and security forces had threatened to suppress the events.

Here you will find one or more explanations in English for the word 'çapulcu' (marauder/looter). Also at the bottom left of the page are several extracts from Wikipedia related to the word çapulcu and çapulcu synonyms and on the right are images related to the word çapulcu.

**Figure 10.** *Istanbul LGBT Pride 2013 at Taksim Square*



Protestor does a Sufi whirling dervish dance in a gas mask in Gezi. Whirling Sufi dances are a traditional aspect of Turkish culture and a mainstay of Turkish tourism. You cannot go to a souvenir shop without seeing dozens of ceramic versions of the flowing robes. It is, therefore, not surprising to find someone performing the traditional whirling dervish dance in a gas mask amid the festive atmosphere of Gezi Park in between police attacks.

**Figure 11.** *Protesters Applaud a Whirling Sufi Wearing a Gas Mask*



**Figure 12.** Icons of Gezi Protests: *Myself, Reading Man, Guitar Hero, Talcid Man, Woman in Red, Redhack, Standing Man, Çarşı, Presenter, Naked Man, Pots & Pans Orchestra, Woman in Black, Vedat the Drummer, Dancing Man, Aunt Vildan, Man with no Disability*



An alternative iftar event planned by the Anti-Capitalist Muslims, a small religious group that had supported the Gezi protests from the beginning. On Tuesday 9 July 2013 at 20:00 hours, the first iftar of Ramadan, street revolutionaries engaged in the activities carried out by Muslims regardless of ethnic, political and social backgrounds. These activities focused on capitalism and money as opposed to being simply the fast-breaking meal.

*“Although the participants in the Gezi Park protests belonged to a diverse alliance of groups from different strata of Turkish society, the common element that bound these groups together was discontent towards the economic and social policies of the AK Party government and the destruction of the public commons. As an active and visible actor in the riots, the anti-capitalist Muslims shattered the attempts of the AK Party government to create a black and white narrative of “them” versus “us” and portray the rioters as godless Islamaphobes. With practices and a discourse based on a Marxist re-interpretation of the Koran, the anti-capitalist Muslims openly question whether the values of Islam can legitimate the economic and social policies of the AK Party government. The first part of the following paper will provide a detailed historical account of the relationship between the Islamic movement in Turkey and capitalism; tracing how the Islamic movement has evolved from the*

*reactionary anti-capitalist Milli Görüş movement into the neo-liberal, pro-business AK Party. The latter part will provide an account and discussion of how the anti-capitalist Muslims challenge the ideological hegemony of the AKP with their discourse and practices and how they have gained public legitimacy with their actions during the Gezi Protests.”(Furman 2013: sa.74)<sup>1</sup>*

**Figure 13.** An Alternative Iftar Event, a Long Iftar Table was Set Up on the İstiklal Avenue Near the Park. Tuesday 9 July 2013 at 20:00 Hours



## Conclusion

Why was it so widespread? In search of Art "public space"  
Who is it inspiring? The hibernating public  
What is it inspiring? Awakening the public from winter sleep

In his book "Public Man's Collapse" Richard Sennett<sup>2</sup> says: "subject" and "object", "private" and "public" have been eliminated between the limits. Nowadays, in the public sphere, the phrase "Dead public space" will be considered because public space is used in the real sense. In recent years in particular, urban transformation and globalization policies have meant that public spaces have been politicized. The street and other property had been lost as public space, and become places where only organized political demonstrations within the law are allowed.

Street art occurs in places where normal daily activities and political dissent coalesce into one melting pot. This creates a threat to the state or the current regime.

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<sup>1</sup>Furman Ivo, 27th September 2013, 'Allah, Bread and Freedom: the anti-capitalist Muslims and the crises of political Islam in Turkey, Retrieved from: <http://www.criticalcontemporaryculture.org/article-ivo-furman-allah-bread-and-freedom-the-anti-capitalist-muslims-and-the-crises-of-political-islam-in-turkey>

<sup>2</sup>Sennett, Richard, "The Fall of Public Man, Ayrıntı, İstanbul, 2002

Public open spaces allow the display of art products and artistic events, ruling out an anti-language talk. These art activities leave significant traces in the memory of the people. Public spaces are arranged according to the needs of the wealthy classes. In contrast, the needs and rights of the poorer classes are ignored.

In Turkey, the poor class is unable to express itself in public areas. "In the city, one of the most amazing things that took place is that the people who were not politically allowed to express themselves in public spaces found that they could". As Harvey (2003) pointed out, the public sphere is a place for people who do not have freedom of speech or assembly. It has diverted the people's criticism, protest, and desire for freedom to places they previously could use; just like Resistance Taksim Trip Park.

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