

THE KING'S LAND AS SITE SPECIFIC ART

When a London-based international artist comes in contact with a run down East End housing estate, what happens? The typical narrative is this: a large well funded curating body facilitates a high profile, costly, impressive and much-reviewed well-hyped installation spectacle that brings the bourgeoisie in droves to the site, where they marvel at not only the work but the frisson of excitement at actually being *in* a run down council estate. Okay, there is another narrative: artist is invited by an organising body with a social agenda to create something with a social cohesion agenda that does not go outside of the local community. But what happens when there is no big organisation, no funding and no agenda behind it? When the artist simply wants to be set free onto the site? It doesn't happen often, but it's happening now: The King's Land.

The King's Land is an urban art installation consisting of a series of drawing-based murals by a single artist, Nazir Tanbouli, an Egyptian-born artist working in drawing, painting and mural art. Tanbouli is making murals on the exterior walls of the Kingsland Estate off the Kingsland Road in Haggerston E2. The estate is undergoing the process of large scale regeneration, and is due for demolition later in the year; for now much of it is depopulated and bricked up. But there are still tenants, awaiting rehousing, and many neighbours in the area. The King's Land aims to bring a dramatic eruption of art into this dreary urban landscape.

In order for an artwork to really be site specific and site responsive, it needs to bring together several elements into a kind of rigorous coherency. The time needs to be significant. The moment of activation must be chosen. The place must have some kind of need for activation, a particular state of being or not-being that calls out for intervention into its form. The artist must have some need of the space, some reason to investigate it, to make his or her impact upon it. The work needs to be right, to sit within the space and not fight the space, but at the same time have an agency of its own, not just decorate the space. And lastly, the politics of the activation. What are they? This essay will look at these questions in an attempt to shed some light upon a project that is still underway, that still has directions left to explore, and has as yet no certainties.

Time

The timing of the The King's Land is crucial. The estate was finally completed in 1952, the year of the Queen's coronation and ironically it's 2012 the year of the Diamond Jubilee that it's slated to come down. That 60 years encapsulates the whole narrative of postwar hope and determination to wrest a decent world out of the ruins of war. And after the golden age, the deluge, the shiny new flats being neglected and ruined, the once-proud estate becoming synonymous with crime and brutality. Of course the actual narrative is much more complex than this, and we must be sure to note that there is nothing inexorable about it. Yet there is a kind of poetic symmetry in the notion of a 60 year cycle of birth and death.

Place

The Kingsland estate is a place of a very specific architecture. A variety of styles were employed to make up the estate which was created over a period of several years. The estate has an open plan so people can walk through, very street-level unlike the complex estate built a few years later with walkways and odd access points. The Kingsland is very friendly, though the stairs are not that convenient if you have shopping or kids – people were either fitter or complained less or bought less stuff back in 1952.

The estate is in its essence attractive and was probably beautiful when new, but in my own living memory it has been always at least partly boarded up. The narrative of why Hackney's housing was allowed to be run down so badly despite housing so many, belongs elsewhere (and I'd like to read

this myself); what we are left with is the result.

Now the interesting thing is that the dereliction has not left the estate as a feral wasteland. It is a perfectly safe, clean set of buildings, sparsely populated by very friendly people who feel quite sore about the fact that their home looks so dreadful. Never mind the passers-by and tourists, or even the neighbours in the nearby private flats, thinking “boy that estate over there is an eyesore” the first people to think that were the residents. “That’s my flat there, surrounded by bricked up flats” isn’t really the directions anyone wants to give.

And so now we get the dual perspective For the people living there, the ruin is personal, unwelcome and an irritant, an eyesore, For the visitor, the ruin is picturesque, Gothic, romantic. 'Twas always thus. We can’t escape it. Read Grand Tour traveller’s accounts of Italy in the 18th century: gushing lyrical descriptions of the ruins, unknowing and insensitive to the fact that the urchins described as living in the chiaroscuro of the ruins were actually homeless desperate poverty stricken kids destined to die young and leave a boated, disease ridden corpse.

Site specific art in derelict or semi derelict spaces cannot escape the connotation of the romantic ruin. Romantic ruins are popular (just google the term and you’ll be inundated with invitations to crumbling castles, collapsing cottages, mildewing manors, decomposing domiciles, eroding edifices – you get the idea). It’s pointless to get on the high horse about this. You don’t have to be Albert Speer to see the ruin-value in a site.

The challenge then for the site specific artist is to acknowledge the romantic lure of the ruin, and then move on quickly. If the work fetishises the ruin, then it loses any impact it has as artwork, but if it ignores the ruin-value it will fail, because ruin value is always there. Rather the work must work within the ruin, and use what the ruin can offer: textures, empty spaces and voids, colours and shades caused by decay and so on.

In this way the artwork reactivates the site, and lets places “speak.” The art invites the visitor to see the place in a new way, to see the previously unseen.

Nazir Tanbouli, says “I am not one of those who wants to fetishise old buildings. I’m not interested in that crap. These buildings are run down, they look ugly and people have to live here, in the estate and around it. My challenge is to take all this ugliness and make something people want to look at.”

Artist

From the artist’s point of view, when considering history 1952 is less notable as the year of the Queen’s coronation is more notable for being the year of revolution in Egypt – the year that Nasser seized power and instituted a national government. From the British point of view at the time it was another nail in the coffin of the British Empire who had hoped to cling on to a few of its interests despite “losing” India. But for the artist, and for many of us, history is always partially told, complex and controversial. One thing we know, history sticks around, The decisions made in 1952 live on in us.

Nazir Tanbouli was born into a middle class family in Alexandria, to an extended family of painters: his great uncle Lotfy El Tanbouli was an Egyptologist and painter, and his uncle Ibrahim El Tanbouli is a painter. As a result, Tanbouli is an artist who is acutely aware of tradition, and also of the need to challenge it. The idea of an Egyptian, in this significant anniversary year, taking over (“colonising”?) a British estate in the middle of the capital city and deluging it with Egyptian art, has a symbolic irony that delights the artist, and reaches out to his audience. A kind of amused

riposte to imperialism? Striking a blow for multiculturalism? When asked if he is influenced by "Egyptian art" Nazir responds "Well, I'm Egyptian so what I do is by definition Egyptian art. Of course I'm influenced by what you call 'Egyptian art,' but then so is all of Western art really. However I don't take a Western, Aristotelian approach to it. That's the difference."

For Tanbouli, The King's Land is a way of dealing with London. He sees it as a Dickensian city, full of odd characters and dark humour. "I'm not British, but maybe I'm a Londoner now; I'm definitely an East Londoner," he says, "I live in this project. The King's Land is our neighbourhood, made for ourselves and our neighbours." It's about us and how we live in this creative, difficult, exciting, horrible, wonderful city. That's why it's out in the street. At the same time, for the artist, the project is a way to speak to the people "back home." He left Egypt as a significant emerging artist. People there have expectations "I want them to see that I haven't changed, I'm still self directed; I didn't become "an international" I'm still me and I do things my own way" Tanbouli says. Tanbouli is never sure if he is immigrant, émigré or exile. Or perhaps none of these. The word is so small now that these old categories barely apply, at least not to an artist.

Work

So what is The King's Land, when you go and look at it? It's a series of murals made by a sensitive process of collaging huge (huge!) ink drawings done on fine, thin paper, directly onto the wall. The technique is one that the artist is developing by doing, a kind of action-research. Tanbouli has made paper murals before but not outdoors, where hardy paint is his usual method. It's hard work. Even with assistants to help him hang and stick and maintain, its hard and relentless work. The weather doesn't help.

The subject matter is ever changing but it is figurative and character based. The first murals depicted huge crowds of characters, more recently he's been doing giant heads. Who know where it will go from here?. Tanbouli's characters are often – though not always – primal creatures, or archetypal characters with a twist of individuality. The work is black and white. Initially this was a budgetary rationale, but Tanbouli has always worked in black and white, and the biggest challenge is to do this kind of black and white ink drawing as monumental art. Black and white is the childhood TV set, cheap comics, the family photos, old Egyptian movies; later in London, he discovers film noir.

World of Art

It's interesting to see how The King's Land fits into the matrix of contemporary art in London today. Simply put, it doesn't. It's really maverick on every level. It's not sponsored, commissioned or paid for (not a penny) by anyone – not a foundation, a curator, a museum gallery or institution. It's not an academic project. It's the artists own initiative. And in this way he has found a kind of freedom difficult to appreciate. On the other hand, taking a lot of money to make an artwork on the homes of relatively poor people did not feel quite right, and this is why he didn't seek any financial sponsorship. Tanbouli has been working from his studio, quietly selling his own work and financing the project from that.

And unusually, the artist actually lives and has his studio on the estate, he doesn't come in from elsewhere to make work "about" the place. This is quite unusual in site specific art, where nomadism is almost *de rigueur*.

The impetus to get down and make the project came when, as an observer of the revolution in Egypt Tanbouli reflected that part of the problem was that the generation of artists and intellectuals he belonged to had largely shirked any involvement with "the people" and were only concerned with

having success internationally. He thought that this left a massive void in Egyptian culture, and has led to the void in leadership and ideology that we see now. As a result he felt that the artist must make speak directly to people, fellow citizens - as a way of communicating and so that art can be a part of everyday life. Art has to be relevant and artists have to embrace the fact that they live here and now, with people. Hence the decision to take this work into the street.

Conclusion

When a London-based international artist comes in contact with a run down East End housing estate, what happens? In the case of the King's Land, a transformative process begins to happen. We begin to see the surroundings differently. We don't see the ugly bricked up building. We just see the art. We see a guy out there, day after day, putting up mural after mural: maybe he's Sisyphus – but maybe he's Alexander, fighting for art.

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