

A Case Study of Works of Tehran Carnival Based on Patricia Phillips's Public Art Machine Theory



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Introduction

Art in Iran has been the arena of a lot of innovative practices in recent years. Art activists produce eclectic styles or go beyond the existing frameworks to step into completely new fields of art. An instance of these innovative creations is the works of the group Tehran Carnival which are quite new and unprecedented urban art practices in the city Tehran. Tehran Carnival is known for its temporary works of street art, urban inventions and collective appearances. (2014, Introduction of Tehran Carnival on website Berlin's House of World Cultures at www.hkw.de/en/programm/projekte/veranstaltung/p_103541.php) This group creates its works in different spots of the urban area. These artworks are mostly created in form of big installations and



placed in quiet or desolate parts of the city. One of the features of these works is lively colors and the other, a sort of enlivenment of the elements which is seen in most of their creations and it can be said that these two very characteristics both contradict with their environment, the prosaic urban space. In spite of this contradiction, these works have a kind of correlation of affinity and even dependence with their environment in a sense that the situation and potentials of the environment are exploited as means or material of artistic creation.

In reviewing the works of Tehran Carnival the criteria of public art, outlined by Patricia Phillips in her article *Out of Order: The Public Art Machine* are of particular importance. Her foundational approach in defining notions of 'Public Space' and 'Public Art' provides a means by which the art created by Tehran Carnival can be analyzed and understood within the milieu of 'Public Art' in Iran and around the world. Phillips's approach focuses on the definition of public space and considers, meanwhile, items such as the features and characteristics of public art and its intention. In fact, the basis of the paper runs around compatibility of these works in the field of and under the title of public art.

The Characteristics of Tehran Carnival Artworks

Unexpectedness. An overview of the art of Tehran Carnival suggests that their artworks are mostly located in spaces with public application. However, none of these places, if not called abandoned, can be considered a spot of crowd congestion. Places like Bagh-e Malek, quiet parts of some areas of Tehran like Velenjak, marginal areas of Darakeh and similar places, are the locations where this group chooses to present its works. (Figure 1) In case of making use of the abandoned or physically poor environments, these works can be compared to the Heidelberg Project in Detroit; although unlike in the Heidelberg, they are not parts of one whole project and they do not undergo later intentional reactive destructions since they carry no political or social insurgencies. (The Michigan Daily, October 14, 2015)



Figure 1. Location of the artworks with respect to the population density map of Tehran. Source: the website of Tehran Municipality at (<http://atlas.tehran.ir/Default.aspx?tabid=269>)

Another interesting point about the presentation location of these pieces is that they induce unexpectedness. Facing a swimming shark in a half-build construction at a corner of the city, a big stork in an abandoned ruin, or a man diving in a canal placed in a solitude spot with no public use in general, all have contrast with their space which can surprise the viewer and attract their attention. (Figure 2) As Edmund Burke states in his treatise *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, a sudden item arises our attention.

In everything sudden and unexpected, we are apt to start; that is, we have a perception of danger, and our nature rouses us to guard against it. It may be observed, that a single sound of some strength, though but of short duration, if repeated after intervals, has a grand effect. Few things are more awful than the striking of a great clock, when the silence of the night prevents the attention from being too much dissipated. The same may be said of a single stroke on a drum (Burke 1990, 76).

It can be said about these artworks too, that the solitude and quiet of the location of the artwork is compensated by the contrast between the artwork and the space it is located in. This can even enhance the suddenness of the work. It can interrupt the monotonous rhythm of the quotidian life and make the audience think at least for some moment. This characteristic of these works,

call upon a principle of formalism asserting that “art should lift us out of the everyday (Bengsten 2013, 76).” In case of a wary audience, the aspects of this confrontation may go further to encourage them to reconsider their way of interaction with their surrounding and how they use it. In a Lefebvrian sense, it can act be as a collective mirror offering each member of society an image of their role. (Zebracki 2012, 736).



Figure2. Steady Dive, Darband, 2013

Greatness. These works have mostly been built in big dimensions. A work titled *urban greenhouse* in the marginal parts of Hemmat highway which comprises big red flowers in the green space by the highway is an example of this feature. (Figure 3) It might be assumed that the big dimensions of the flowers in this work are only to create some conformity with its wide surrounding space, but a careful look into other works of this group proves greatness to be a dominant feature of them. One of the installations, for instance, displays a stork in a ruin which is very big compared to the construction. (Figure 4) *The White Globules* also, which is represented in the form of white globes floating on water, is another manifestation of this feature. In fact, these works are not smaller than the real scale even if they are not particularly large in comparison with the space they are located in.



Figure3. Urban Greenhouse,
Hemat highway, 2011



Figure4. Left Out from Migration,
Velenjak, 2010

These considerable dimensions have a notable role in affecting the viewers. The dimensions of an artwork act as a significant feature that enables the physical and material identity of the work to have a cogent function. The big scale of an art work inspire the viewer to reconsider the artwork from the most sensible and intuitive aspect.(2014, kunsthistorisches Institute of Florence website at <http://www.khi.fi.it/en/aktuelles/veranstaltungen/veranstaltungen/veranstaltung388/index.html>)

In a discussion on the Turbine hall of TATE museum, Luis Burguis refers to the issue of scale in art as the issue of choosing between overcoming the space and being overcome by it. Changing the size of something so that it exceeds the typical, would create disturbing, exciting effects. “We expect cathedral dimensions in a cathedral. To encounter them in an art gallery is peculiar, vertiginous, and for artists, stimulating.” (Jonathan Jones’s 2003 article on guardian at <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2003/dec/15/1>)

The dimensions of these artworks likewise stimulate excitement. Although they are located in the marginal areas or outside of the congestion centers, they overcome the space and consequently become center of attention by means of their dimensions. Regarding the effect of size in the audience’s reaction, Edmund Burke also believes that the aesthetical characteristics usually exist in objects with bigger dimensions, although beauty is

attributed to smaller objects as well. He states that the affection produced by large bodies adorned with the spoils of beauty, is a tension continually relieved ... There is something so over-ruling in whatever inspires us with awe, in all things which belong ever so remotely to terror, that nothing else can stand in their presence (Burke 1990, 142).

On the other hand, the big dimensions of these works bring to the mind one of the principles of the Minimalism movement according to which “the body is implicated not only through the haptic recognition of shape, but through the phenomenon of scale”. It is based on this very principle that many minimal artworks are recognized by a large scale that relates to the size of the human body, or they require physical engagement in order to be fully conceived (Kelly 1998, 240).

Lively colors and playful theme. The use of lively colors as well as contrasting ones is a quality permeating the works of Tehran Carnival. This feature has an ambivalent effect: confronting the surrounding meanwhile enlivening the environment. This contrast and confrontation, lies in some cases in the relationship of the artwork with its space situation, in some cases in the work itself, and sometimes in both. For example an installation titled *Dada* was installed in Tehran’s Bagh-e-Malek which is in form of a horse, in reference to the literal meaning of Dada and has a very vivid red color as well as a playful pattern. (Figure 5) The warm and playful color and theme of this piece contrast the old and cold ambiance of the building serves as a background to the work. On the other hand it contradicts the conceptual space of the absurd movement of Dada. As a matter of fact the contrast between the morphologic structure of this work and its relationship with its surrounding space brings about inspiritment of the environment on one hand, and grabbing the audience’s attention on the other. This would be perceived better while we consider that an artwork of a very rigid form and style, or cold and neutral color, might not turn out to be very successful in attracting the audience’s attention in the space of this building. *Fink* in Baghe-e Malek and *Sleep Walker* in Darband area are other examples of the mentioned contrast, both having color



contrast with the items in their surrounding area. Moreover in the latter the floating condition of the bed also contradicts with the physically inanimate condition of sleeping which the structure of the work brings to the mind. (Figures 6 & 7)



Figure5. Dada, Malek Garden, 2010



Figure6. Fink, Malek Garden, 2011



Figure7. Sleep Walker, Saad Abad, 2010

Aside from the factors of contrast between color and location, or contrast between color and conceptual sense of the work which contribute to attracting the audience's attention, color itself can independently make the viewer aware of the artistic aspect of the work and by this means settle in the viewer's memory. As Kandinsky has pointed as well, all created representations might lose their conceptual effectiveness due to cultural changes, but the color compositions used will maintain their influence regardless of the work and its meaning (Groys 2010).

Motion, dynamism, and enlivenment. These installations often have a vitalizing effect on the urban environment in that they



are either representations of living items or represent objects in a dynamic and lively body. The sense of motion is one of the other qualities of these works which enhances the sense of liveliness. One eloquent instance in this regard is *Steady dive* in a water canal in Darband area which represents a person in an unstable position of diving. *Pink Panther* is the name of a work of the same type which displays the animal moving as it is in the middle of a jump. (Figure 2) In *Production to Consumption* too, despite the stable surrounding of the installation, a sense of movement and activity is noticeable. Other than the mentioned works which hold representations of living creatures, this dynamic sense is also apparent in other pieces created by this group. (Figure 8) In *Fink* the slanted composition, lively colors, and the way the compartments are assembled along with half-open mouths, all have brought in dynamism to the lifeless parts of the work. *Metamorphosis* is the name of another piece that the sense of living is instilled therein by representing the feeling of grief. Even in the work in which the main element is a yellow bed, being floated in water along with the floating footwear beside it convey the sense of movement very well. One would say the mentioned bed is different from the still and lifeless peer of it in the real world.



Figure8. Production to Consumption, Saadat Abad Faraz, 2011

All the mentioned examples have not only brought liveliness, dynamism, and activeness into the monotonous and dry urban environment, but they have drawn as much attention upon

the lifeless items which are not typically noticed in quotidian life of the audience as the attention cast over living items.

Useful exploit of the objects. An interesting point in the structure of these works is useful employment of the objects in hand which are not likely to have any considerable use by the society. This is seen both in the way the presentation places are chosen and in the medium and instruments and the creative use of them. Useful exploiting and taking benefit of the spaces and environments such as destroyed or deserted structures which are counted as useless, serve as an obstruction towards considering them dead and useless. In this case these works share a quality with tactical urbanism in which low-cost artistic interventions are similarly used to activate public spaces. (Douglas 2015, 155) It reminds us that despite having lost their prior application or the utilization that is socially assumed as beneficial, such spaces can still hold effective roles and turn from a passive space to an active sphere of a brand new application.

Moreover, Tehran Carnival uses very handy and easily-found objects or abandoned ones as artistic media. And therefore reminds the viewer of some potential of the objects that they overlook. Using newspaper, patches of sack, an old bed, or a rusty and abandoned machine and integrating them as means of artistic creation, are some instances of this sort of usage which encourages us to have beyond a normal look to the items present in our surrounding. In fact “the true standard of the arts is in every man's power; and an easy observation of the most common, sometimes of the meanest things in nature, will give the truest lights (Burke 1990, 49)”.

A Comparative Approach to Tehran Carnival and the Public Art Machine

Public art is “permanent or temporary artistic creations on sites outside conventional museological spaces (e.g. museums and galleries) that have open public access (Zebracki 2012, 736).” One of the theoreticians discussing the public art is Patricia C. Phillips



who introduces a new approach to the not-fully-determined field of Public Art by her conviction of the Public Art Machine offered in an article with the same title and studies the properties and features of this art as well. This theory gives special thought to the concept of public space as the space holding public art inside, and meanwhile studies the conceptual features of public art such as its interactions, framework, and purposes. Phillips's perspective provides an appropriate groundwork for studying the works of Tehran Carnival and evaluating their competency with the criteria of public art.

Phillips specially criticizes the process of selecting works of public art based on their accordance and compatibility with a series of determined standards and criteria. She believes that being required to go through a course of institutional and formal stages like presenting and submitting a proposal, filing documents to receive a budget and negotiating with the authorities and curators, requires using some skills that hamper creation of a potent work of art (Phillips 1988, 191). It is based on this very contention that Phillips emphasizes more on individual perspective and independent thinking (Bengsten 2013, 64).

In Tehran Carnival's art, one can observe a reflection of the core of this contention which is to not necessarily fit into a predetermined framework. Before presenting their work independently, this group spent some time trying to fulfill the galleries satisfaction to exhibit their works and since they did not manage to do so, they presented their works arbitrarily at the places of their own choice. Aside from confirming how narrow the boundary of the acceptance criteria of galleries is, this could be counted as an effective factor of maintaining innovation in these creations. The independent thinking put forward by Phillips could well be seen in the innovative style of these artworks. Had these works undergone changes or adjustments towards being adapted to the predetermined criteria of the galleries, they could have lost their unique and special nature and consequently, the independent thinking mentioned would have been lost to thoughts oriented towards specific criteria and framework. In fact, these independently presented works can be considered a confrontation

with the restrictions and obstacles resulted from rigid and conservative institutional frameworks; a representation of what Phillips addresses as “commitment to independent ‘guerrilla’ activity (Phillips 1988, 196)”.

However, pointing the reason of the activity of those who have gotten involved in lobbying for the official supports and policies regarding public art, Phillips also states that the art which is beyond the accepted configurations and the criteria of the galleries and museums, is exposed to different forces and more risks. Therefore it should be provided with some fundamental supports and assurance (Ibid, 196). Through this perspective, the works of Tehran Carnival can be considered as somehow overlooked. Nevertheless, it depends very much on the cognition and acceptance of these works by the environment to compensate this shortcoming; a procedure that these artworks themselves are going through.

Another subject which Phillips emphatically contends is the concept of *public dimension*. According to Phillips’s approach, public space is beyond just a physical or geographical space and it is indeed a space holding different meanings and ideas; a dynamic and mutable field that raises debates and controversies which can be constructive. She explains that in contrast with a common assumption that attributes the publicness of the works of public art to the physical site they are presented at, public sphere is a psychological construct rather than an environmental and physical one (Ibid, 192). In case of the location site of Tehran Carnival artworks, it might be said that they are located in marginal spots of the city that are not truly *public* while some other spaces like the bustling city squares and crowded streets and centers would probably better correspond to the concept of public dimension. Phillips’s theory is a legitimate justification in response to this claim. According to her approach, “the concept of public spirit is part of every individual's psychic composition: it is that metaphysical site where personal needs and expression meet with collective aspirations and activity (Ibid).” In the current subject, too, solitary environment and old abandoned places which are chosen as locations of these works properly go properly with the



playful sense reflected therein that implies a kind of nostalgia. This youthful playful sense reflected in these pieces is in fact a representation of the very collective spirit and aspiration, a common public sense that is embedded in the psychological construct of a wide range of audiences and which is their meeting point both with each other and with the artwork. Even supposing that not all the audiences and viewers might have a similar feedback to the work, the controversies and negotiations encouraged regarding social or spatial differences indicate the publicness of art in space (Zebracki 2012, 742). Also, Phillips herself recognizes conceptual openness and negotiability as groundwork of public art. "The public is the sphere we share in common; wherever it occurs it begins in the decidedly "somewhere" of individual consciousness and perception." Therefore public art obtains publicness through the way it gets engaged with individual interests, collective values, social issues, political events, and extensive cultural patterns which are the indicators urban life (Phillips 1988, 192).

In *Out of Order: The Public Art Machine*, Patricia Phillips introduces public art as a profession of which the practitioners are aim for beautifying, enlivening, or entertaining the citizens. Casting an investigative look towards the works of Tehran Carnival, would track the three mentioned intentions ,as well: beautifying the urban environment has been fulfilled through the creation of works with considerable chromatic and morphic aesthetical aspects, enlivenment has been done through representation natural living creatures as well as the still items in lively formats, representation of dynamic motions, taking advantage of apparently-dead and useless spaces, and also applying vivid and lively colors, and finally, entertaining the citizens has been satisfied through pulling them out from the quotidian routine of day to day and disrupting their monotonous rhythm of interacting with their environment. But one notable point besides meeting these three aims is the implicit accountability of these works to the issue Phillips discusses afterward. She contends that these concerns of public art practitioners reduce the public art's mission to making people feel good about themselves and their environment. Indeed a careful

look at the works of this group reveals reflections which are beyond the mentioned concerns. The idea of using very routine and widely-available objects which might seem trivial in a way that brings about a positive change or reflection into the environment can induce the audience to notice their process of consumption and using the existing sources. Moreover, such lively and spirited arts in the impassive environment of daily life make the audience feel the shortfall and gradually become aware of the importance of preserving the natural environment. Consequently the purposes of these works can go beyond some limited facile intentions which according to Phillips are so simple or obvious like embellishment or camouflage that they do not seem to be associated with art (Ibid, 191).

Moreover, public art is defined by Phillips as a new field of expertise which is apart from the coalescence of styles derived from the expiration of traditional distinctions of different fields of art such as sculpture, painting, drawing, photography, and installation (Ibid). Public art is a new field which bears so little resemblance to the previous artistic expressions that it cannot even be counted as their progressed instance. The same case applies to the works of Tehran Carnival in a sense that they hold some minimal or post-minimal patterns and they are mostly installations, but they can never be defined in any of these predetermined styles as a whole. Even a combination of two or more of those styles still will not fully cover some characteristics of these works including the influence of environment and not being required to fit in an institutional framework. As Phillips states elsewhere in a dialogue with Krzysztof Wodiczko “This is an empowering way to think about all art: that it will not retaliate, that it can be used in multiple ways (Phillips 2003, 42).”

Variant vs. Case	Audience	Framework	Space	Purpose
Phillips's Theory	Public	Independent, Non-institutional	Psychological rather than physical	Beautifying, Enlivening, Entertaining, and beyond
Tehran Carnival	Public	Independent, Non-institutional	Psychological, Physical	Beautifying, Enlivening, Entertaining, and beyond

Table 1. A Brief Table of the Major Correspondencies between Tehran Carnival's Creations and Phillips's Theory

Conclusion

To evaluate the art of Tehran Carnival as public art, by means of Patricia Phillips's suggested criteria; first the characteristics of these works have been studied. Thereafter these characteristics have been compared to those counted by Phillips in her literature. In conclusion the characteristics of Tehran Carnival's artwork analyzed vis-à-vis Philip's definition of 'Public Art' provides an adequate basis for the appreciation of their artwork as a genuine and authentic form of public art. Philips's criteria for Public art stipulate that public art is a new field of expertise of which the practitioners seek purposes like beautifying and entertaining. However she criticizes this as an insufficient intention. She also describes the public space as a psychological structure rather than a physical one. When applied to the characteristics of Tehran Carnival's artwork namely inanimation, liveliness, surprising the audience, and useful benefitting of everyday materials, a persuasive argument for the appreciation of Tehran Carnival's work as Public Art is set forth.

By transforming public spaces public art seeks to engage and interact with people within their given environment. Tehran Carnival as a producer of public art has arguably transformed certain areas in Tehran from a passive space to an engaging and influential environment. The importance of such has been the



increase of art appreciation in Iranian society, liberating it from a cloistered gallery atmosphere to a greater community based approach.

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