

AS IF IT NEVER EXISTED

Vasıf Kortun

Big and small, fragments of a tree root and trunk with sawdust are displayed on the floor of the gallery. It looks like a simple and arbitrary accumulation accommodating the self-contained beauty of the meandering curves of the organic material. Even if some pieces were differently placed or changed, the whole would still remain powerful. However, a closer look reveals much more. Marks of mistreatment are evident in the cracks, tears, and wrenched fibres. It seems that the root and the trunk have been attacked with indiscriminate brutality using saws, mallets, and axes. It has been shoved out of the earth violently. As the installation begins

to look like a crime scene and a field of destruction, it becomes necessary to retrace the history of the event that brought us here. As such, the work does not belong to a particular history of installation that problematizes and displaces the rationale of the gallery in a humanizing effort to expand the institution's horizons. It is not a replacement for something more or less profound than what it is. The installation is not a surreptitious metaphorical gesture. It is a matter-of-fact. Hence, the title 'As if it never existed' refers not only to the eradication of the object, but the removal from the very site that nourished it and it in return instilled life to.

Horada stumbled upon the tree in the gardens of Yıldız Technical University where she studied. She noticed the trunk when only the low stump was left standing of what appears to have been a mighty tree. She then recorded the stump only to find that not soon after it was to be completely uprooted. The tree happened to be an old Paulownia. Quite appropriately, Paulownia is a fast developing tree with an ability to recoup ecologically stressed and degraded lands. Its roots run deep and they help increase the soil's organic elements, processing and filtering contaminants with a high oxygenation



Photo: Sibel Horada

capacity. Paulownias are believed to be one of the most suitable trees to combat deforestation. In short, they offset the dirty work that capitalist greed produces.

The story of Horada's work runs parallel to a series of recent events that have taken place at Yıldız Technical University's [YTU] main campus abutting the Barbaros Boulevard. A former palatial garden, the campus is a beautiful, green and commanding location in the centre of Istanbul. One of the oldest educational institutions in the city, YTU has come under pressure in recent months in the context of Istanbul's relentless privatization. Recently, former state monopolies, industries, factories, docks, shipyards, and custom depots have been shopped around and/or sold under dubious public-private ventures. City universities—the grounds of which



have been traditionally off-limits to the public—may be up for relocations to remote areas. The argument goes that the city centres are too valuable to be left to university students. The removal of the old Paulownia has similarities too germane to pass up on. One of the most venerable tropes in art history, specifically in romanticism, is the image of the singular tree. Trees echo the reunion with the spiritual self, the visible cycles of life, birth, growth and decay, and cut through all religions, animism to shamanism, Judaism and Christianity. Unfortunately, capitalism has no time for time.

The Bologna process could be seen as an effort to align European universities to a level of neoliberal efficiency and standardization. It produces exchangeability akin to the transportability of goods and services, producing a form of delocalization hitherto unexperienced. Coupled with this fact, public universities in Turkey have invariably fragile stakeholders. This leaves the ownership of the universities to the appointed and chosen, and top down decisions are taken under extremely opaque contexts. In such a context a university property in the centre of town whets appetites. What began as a potential move of the arts faculty with “sound”

excuses—”are frivolous activities to stand in the way of the common good for the university to claim necessary funds?”—will certainly break the ground for much worse to come. This is how new capitalism works. It allows a trend from which there is no return. It does not only eradicate the undesirable but renders it invisible, by erasing any trace of it. It does more than live and let die. As the philosopher Marina Griznic notes, this implies a fundamental transfer from a bio-politics to necro-politics. It is not enough that the tree is cut. It must then be dug



Sibel Horada, *As If It Never Existed*
Installation view at 29. Contemporary Artists Istanbul Exhibition
Istanbul: Akbank Sanat, 2010
Photo: Sibel Horada

out, and discarded with. The hole must be covered and replaced with a stylish flower bed. Life must be exchanged with style.

The artist placed the Paulownia right back in the core of the psyche of those who forgot to remember, but also for those who never had a memory of it. Here it does not let die but allows to live.

Vasıf Kortun

— Katalogue of 29. *Contemporary Artists Istanbul Exhibition*¹, Istanbul: Painting and Sculpture Museums Association, 2010

— Vasıf Kortun, 20, Istanbul: SALT/Garanti Kültür AŞ, 2018

FOOTNOTE

¹. 29. *Contemporary Artists Istanbul Exhibition*, Akbank Sanat, 22 July-28 August 2010. Curators: Marc Gloede and November Paynter. Artists: Nermin Adanır, Tansu Akmansoy, Hasan Salih Ay, Müge Bilgin, Gülderen Depas, Ferit Furuncu, Sibel Horada, Aslıhan Özdemir, Emrah Şengün, Ayşe Topçuoğulları, Deniz Üster.