"THE SKY OVER FLORENCE". WHAT IS THE MEANING OR FUNCTION FOR CONTEMPORARY PUBLIC ART?

Anyone visiting Florence around April would have come across the outdoor exhibition *"Il Cielo Sopra Firenze"/"The Sky Above Florence"*[1], by Emmanuel Giannelli. A contemporary Italian artist born in Rome, Giannelli[2] is the author of two imposing works of public art: *Korf 17*, a work consisting of two 5 meters sculptural figures in front of Palazzo Strozzi, in Piazza del Duomo, and *The Watcher*, also a 5 meters figure, in Piazza San Lorenzo.

Korf 17

Figures 1 e 2. Emmanuel Giannelli, *Korf 17*

With their arms crossed, on a pedestal, the monumental character of the *Korf 17* duo seems to unexpectedly contain within itself remnants of traditional public art, reminiscent of a type of statuary that contradicts, at least in part, what would be a more contemporary language. Approximated, from a symbolic point of view, to an altar, the pedestal lends itself, in principle, to the sense of consecration and the sacralization of values. Thus, contrary to the phenomenon of art's detachment from its religious character, led by modernity (widely discussed by Baudelaire and Benjamin, among others), *Korf 17* is set in a dubious register, between a system of values that is now defrauded and a popular character or a condition of ephemerality that, after all, reveals a certain parody tone. Since the loss of the heroic sense of public art – here understood in its broadest sense, as art in the public space – is associated with the loss of the pedestal itself, it could be said that the resistance of this same pedestal, in this case, indicates an artistic choice that challenges the most expected principles of what would be the grammar of distinctive contemporary art. Does Giannelli intend to shake up the *status quo* of a language that has accommodated itself precisely to a code that has been consolidated in the counterpoint of traditional systems? Already in the second half of the 19th century, Rodin had challenged the criteria of the traditional monument, "lowering" Balzac's pedestal and exhibiting the sculpture publicly in Paris, wrapping the poet in an "improvised" robe, in a casual and trivial pose that, at the time, shocked some of the more conservative citizens. It should therefore be made clear that monumentality and modern, or even contemporary, art are not mutually incompatible:

> It can therefore be said that, despite its crisis today, monumentality is not dead, and the same can be said of the monument, an example of which are three of the greatest artists of the contemporary era, Rodin, Picasso and Giacometti, who, in a rupture with the molds of the academic tradition, carried out other forms of commemorative expression. (Correia, 2013, p. 94)

Furthermore, *Korf 17* still presents itself as a disruptive work, precisely because of the particular way in which it reconciles some of the formal roots of traditional monumental art with a proposal for critical thinking, materialized in unexpected features, about the condition of the (post)human in contemporary times. With their necks raised to the sky, both monumental figures, displaying a kind of 3D device on their faces, show themselves to be "searching for their own vision and their own future"[3]. The relationship between technology and humanity emerges, according to the artist himself, as what needs to be communicated. It should also be noted that the double nature of the black and gold double-skinned figures may suggest, together with their scale, monumental size and position as guardians (in this case, at the door of the official Tuscan government building), a return to the sphinx as a type of statuary. Perhaps, in this case, with a somewhat satirical tone. The sculptures are also male figures, naked and muscular. What are both *korf 17* guarding? What are they trying to protect, in a place that is already particularly charged with historical and symbolic significance? Are Giannelli's statues a satire on pagan Roman statues?

Returning to the sphinx, we must remember that it is a mythological creature with the body of a lion and a human head (male or female), present both in Egyptian culture, where it is often seen as a symbol of power, and in Greek mythology. Heir to antiquity, Roman civilization asserted itself by appropriating ancient aesthetic and symbolic codes. At the same time, inscribed in the wake of the culture that preceded them, the *Korf 17* figures differentiate themselves by proposing the "dual human nature" of the human: "innovative and capable of doing anything" and, on the other hand, "profoundly self-destructive"[4].

Once all the possibilities of human life on the ground (ultimately symbolizing planet Earth) have been exhausted, *Korf 17* seeks to reinvent itself by projecting its hopes vertically, in search of an unknown horizon, somewhere in the "sky"... (remotely reminiscent of the lyrics "the sky only begins where the earth ends" from Benjamin's album *Dias em Branco*, literally translated as "Blank Days"). Melancholic figure of an uncertain future or protest figure?

Overcrowded with tourists, the more than emblematic Piazza Duomo houses *Korf 17* almost contiguous to the imposing cathedral. In addition to the symbolic overload pre-existing to Giannelli's work, there is an almost impossible hermeneutic addition to the place. Crushed by the weight of the medium that the square itself constitutes, how can the unsuspecting reader still glance, even if distractedly, at *Korf 17*? Can the meaning of the Piazza, with everything that produces it as a perennial place, and that of *Korf 17* contaminate each other? To what extent? Reminding us that places are produced and transformed in the passage of time? Let's see what the local press says about the work:

> The Korf17 duo to the rear of the cathedral gaze in search of something we do not yet know, their virtual reality headsets questioning the relationship between technology and humanity. It's a disconcerting sight in a piazza defined by religion and government, although the artist's aim is to invite us to overcome ephemerality in favour of a wider perspective [5].

Não será despropositado convocar para esta leitura a noção de indústria cultural (música industrial e eletrónica, livros, amigos, gravações, BD, punk enquanto movimento juvenil de protesto), pela qual é absorvido o artista. Será excessivo admitirmos que *Korf 17* nos convida a pensar sobre os limites da sociedade moderna?

It wouldn't be unreasonable to call upon the notion of the culture industry (industrial and electronic music, books, friends, recordings, comics, punk as a youth protest movement), by which the artist is absorbed, for this reading. Is it too much to admit that *Korf 17* invites us to think about the limits of modern society?

If we persist in situating the work in a parodic tone, we can be encouraged, as observers/readers, to contribute to its creative and semiosic meaning, for example, by establishing a link between the artwork's message and Debord's critique of the capitalist system. This is because of the distant formal similarity, and suggestive character, between the 3D devices exhibited by the *Korf 17* and the three-dimensional glasses seen on the cover of the 1983 edition of Guy Debord's [6] *Society of the Spectacle*. Although this may be an accidental analogy, it is not unusual to note the choice, in both cases, of an obvious and expressive sign, often used by popular culture, of the human vocation to reinvent ways of extending their sensory and gnoseological capacities. It's also worth noting that next to *Korf 17* is an artwork by Marco Lodola[7], also a contemporary Italian artist, who is known for the pop, fun and trivial tone of his creations. Depicting figures from popular imagery, in cheerful and playful colors, the piece in question partly contrasts and ruptures with the monumental (albeit satirical) and somewhat classical character of *Korf 17*, offering us a less "serious" attitude in approaching and reading the meaning of place. Depicting three female figures, who seem to have a familiar connection with each other, sitting on a park bench, the scene suggests a relaxed atmosphere of leisure in which a book, a sun hat, a ball and the relaxed attitude of someone simply enjoying their surroundings all have their place. We, the passers-by observing the artwork, are at the same time being observed, as objects of the gaze of the imaginary depicted characters.

Figures 3 and 4. Piece by Marco Lodola, situated next to *Korf 17*

The Watcher

Figure 5. Emmanuel Giannelli, *The Watcher*

In Piazza San Lorenzo, on the other hand, we find *The Watcher*, a 5 meters sculpture representing a giant human figure, considered the heir to *Mr. Arbitrium*, a smaller-scale work from 2020 by the same artist. Like *Korf 17*, does The Watcher represent a "bridge between humanity and eternity" (https://www.emanuelegiannelli.it/en/) or an expression of despair? The posture, resting on a pedestal with its neck raised to the sky, is similar to *Korf 17*. Instead of a 3D device, the figure's eyes project a kind of monstrous double eye distension, like a pair of eyes out of orbit. Once again, we are faced with a naked figure of a muscular male body, with clenched fists, whose torso is pulled back in an inverted arc, with its head facing the sky. Instead of the double skin, the body is bathed in a grayish bronze tone. In common with *Korf 17*, the figure is gigantic and realistic in terms of anatomical detail, reminiscent of the classical character of mimetic art, based on the relationship between the work and its model. Furthermore, the proximity to a religious building, this time a medieval church, lends an unusual tone to the sculpture:

> In San Lorenzo, the four-metre-high resin sculpture The Watcher bears a passing resemblance to Mr. Arbitrium with none of the previous leaning on the medieval church walls. Looking up to the sky, a signature trait of the sculptor's work, The Watcher turns his muscular heft and accentuated binocular eyes to the heavens, in search of strength or spiritual guidance, or perhaps just surveying the skies watchful of an attack [8].

Remembering that public space – in the sense of logical (logos, reason, word) *topos* (place) – is a social product, in the manner of Lefebvre (1991), local residents were not indifferent to *The Watcher* and left their graffiti impressions next to the work, as reported:

> "Oh Giannelli, this morning Bruna opened the shutters and said, 'If only my husband had it...' Welcome back to San Lorenzo, giant... your name spreads around the world... but they could have given it some underwear!". [9]

In an effectively persuasive way, given the accent on the curvature of the back and the head of the figure twisted towards the sky, it could be said that *The Watcher* undoubtedly invites passers-by to follow the same movement of the gaze. The strangeness of the familiar, if we consider that we usually move around the urban space without shifting our attention beyond what is in our line of sight, is therefore one of the immediate effects that the sculpture arouses, an effect extended, moreover, to *Korf 17*. What do Giannelli's figures observe? What are they watching? What perspectives do they seek to widen, in the sense of verticality, in a counterpoint to the ground and the place in which they stand?

Public art and the limits of contemporaneity

First of all, Giannelli's sculptural works are situated between the figurative and the conceptual. In the artist's words, the feeling of disorientation and the chaos of contemporaneity are the starting points that inspire his creation. For Giannelli, the role of his art is to immortalize a given state of affairs, just like a spectator who tries to give shape to what is presented before him, rather than to produce value judgments:

> "The artist immortalises all the chaos of the contemporaneity without giving judgment but remaining a spectator, suspended among doubts and possibilities". (https://www.emanuelegiannelli.it/en/)

And as critic Enrico Matteri comments, the problem of technological implications in the current discussion about the ontological condition is imperative:

> My curiosity regarding the sculptural research of Emanuele Giannelli has always been directed towards the unusual situations that his work depicts, a sort of serial and inexpressive army that moves through a background of disquiet, a constant presence of the human figure that doesn't represent any centrality in the world but more likely a disorientation in it. An individuality that has no reason to exist and that is generated, in a world where temporal subversion becomes spatial subversion, a situation of complete upheaval where the shapes and images of the artist's work take to life. A kind of humanity born with welders glasses that moves into a reality that embraces multi dimensions in which he orients himself with new found senses; elements that, till now, are represented as a constant in the artist's work. (https://www.emanuelegiannelli.it/en/)

In a unique city that is particularly overflowing with all kinds of historical, religious and artistic artifacts, it is remarkable to notice how much space is still opened up for contemporary public art in some of Florence's most emblematic squares. Transversal seems to be the temporary theme of the technological condition, not only represented by Giannelli, but also by Thomas J. Prince, in Piazza della Signoria, where we stumble upon the bronze work *Time Unfolding*. With her back to the Palazzo Vecchio, near the Uffizi Gallery, a young golden girl, on a giant scale (3.6 meters tall), leans over her cell phone, oblivious to her surroundings. On the artist's website, you can read about this and similar works:

> Celebrated for his large-scale figurative sculptures, Thomas J Price draws our attention to the psychological embodiment of his fictional characters, foregrounding the intrinsic value of the individual and subverting structures of hierarchy. Amalgamated from diverse sources, the works are developed through a hybrid approach of traditional sculpture and intuitive digital technology. (https://www.thomasjprice.com/current)

Figures 6 e 7. Thomas J. Prince, *Time Unfolding*

Considering the different works mentioned, and in particular those by Giannelli, it can be said that there are two transversal characteristics to highlight: the scale of grandeur, on the one hand, and the public function, on the other. The scale of grandeur, insofar as, with the exception of Lodola's work, the figures portrayed impose themselves by means of a superhuman measure, gigantic, only comparable to the grandeur of the historical and religious buildings that cohabit with them. Crushed by the difference in scale, passers-by are confined to their measure, to their limits, thus suggesting the loss of human centrality (Pires, Pinto-Coelho & Magalhães, 2024), as it was thought of until the Renaissance, given over to the expansion of other possibilities of being and existing. In addition to the verticalization of space in Giannelli's works, there is also the perception of a changing temporality. For cosmological theory, according to the Aristotelian model, celestial space was opposed to terrestrial space:

> This view changed in the Modern Age, when Galileo Galilei explained that there is an infinite space that surrounds us, infinitely open, and in this way the previous conception of space dissolved and became desacralized. (Correia, 2013, p. 10)

As for the public function, it is clear that the eminently commemorative nature of traditional public art is overlaid by a critical vocation, the sharing of a given vision of contemporary reality which, in the cases here under discussion, is technologically determined. Taking into account the four works mentioned, all of which were simultaneously exhibited in the public space in Florence for a given period, only Lodola is apparently indifferent to such a theme, inviting us to detach ourselves from reality and projecting ourselves into a fantastical universe, full of happiness and idleness.

"Public spaces are never made once and for all" (Correia, 2013, p. 31), even if they are overloaded with meaning, symbols and historicity. This is perhaps the most obvious lesson to be drawn from the reading exercise explained here. The examples under discussion illustrate the dynamic nature of public places and the role that public art can play in this transformation. In a unique way, what deserves special attention is the contradictory nature of the artistic proposals in question, especially when considering *Korf 17* and *The Watcher*. Inverting one of the principles of contemporary public art, the figures observed are characterized by their monumental scale (Diamonsen, 1976), as well as by the movement that subverts the approach towards passers-by and the space-time experienced in everyday life. Limited by the coordinates of what defines a "down here", as opposed to an "up there", human passers-by find themselves cohabiting the public place with gigantic, superhuman figures. Do these figures occupy the role of new contemporary heroes? Figures not from the historical past, but from an uncertain future?

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Notes:

[1] www.theflorentine.net

[2] "Born in Rome but living in Versilia, Emanuele Giannelli is an Italian viscerally provocative artist, where provocative means "provocateur of emotions". Giannelli is a lover of contemporaneity and dual human nature: innovative and potentially capable of doing anything it wants on one hand, deeply self-destructive on the other. His works are a perfect balance between figurative and conceptual arts, thanks to which the artist immortalises all the chaos of the contemporaneity without giving judgment but remaining a spectator, suspended among doubts and possibilities." (https://www.emanuelegiannelli.it/en/).

[3] https://www.emanuelegiannelli.it/en/

[4] https://www.emanuelegiannelli.it/en/

[5] Emanuele Giannelli's sculptures return to central Florence. The Watcher in San Lorenzo and Korf17 in piazza del Duomo invite onlookers to gain a broader perspective on modern society. (2025, February 20). *The Florentine*. https://www.theflorentine.net/2025/02/20/emanuele-giannelli-sculptures-return-central-florence/

[6] Photo by J.R. Eyerman.

[7] "Marco Lodola (Italian, b. 1955), one of the most acclaimed artists in Italy and a key representative of the Neo-Futurist movement, Marco Lodola is distinguished for his distinct Pop style that blends art, design, film, and music. Recognized for their bright colors and recognizable subject matter, Lodola's lustrous sculptures of pop culture icons such as Lupin, Batman (2018), and Freddie Mercury (2018) display fun and playfulness. His work, which also includes scooters and cars made with perspex and neon, conveys the power of art to uplift people. Lodola was commissioned to create sculptures and installations for 400 Dior boutiques in 2021. He has also created work for events, films, music videos, album covers, and fashion designers. He studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Florence and Milan" (https://www.artsy.net/artist/marco-lodola).

[8] Emanuele Giannelli's sculptures return to central Florence. The Watcher in San Lorenzo and Korf17 in piazza del Duomo invite onlookers to gain a broader perspective on modern society. (2025, February 20). *The Florentine*. https://www.theflorentine.net/2025/02/20/emanuele-giannelli-sculptures-return-central-florence/

[9] *Idem*.

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