

VISIBLE FROM THE CORNER OF MY EYE





You take delight not in a city's seven or seventy wonders,
but in the answer it gives to a question of yours.

ITALO CALVINO
Invisible Cities

Artist Roberley Bell traveled to Istanbul, Turkey as a Fulbright Senior Scholar in 2010. A childhood spent in Latin America and Southeast Asia, and subsequent treks abroad as an adult had always propelled her to seek environs significantly distanced from her home in Western New York. She was not alone. Bell was one of seven million foreign visitors who arrived in Istanbul in 2010. That same year the city was heralded as a “European Capital of Culture.” With a population of 13.4 million people, Istanbul is one of the world’s largest cities by population. A transcontinental city, it is the cultural center of Turkey, with deep historical footing in Europe and Asia.

To gain her own firm foothold in Istanbul, Bell spent much time during her six-month artist residency wandering the labyrinth-like network of city streets and journeying in and out of the closely nestled warrens of diverse ethnic neighborhoods. With camera in hand, she compiled a visual record of her walks, measuring her daily steps and encounters in an outpouring of snapshots. At every turn, Bell was drawn to the slightest remnant of natural phenomenon she came across, in particular the lone tree. This is not surprising given the thematic impulse that has long directed Bell’s artwork—the fragility of the natural world amid the ever-widening spread of human-made environments. Whether spindly, manicured or severed, the pictured tree in Bell’s photographs hinted at incongruous stories of natural survival in a burgeoning city of buildings and populations, both native and foreign.

As an aide-mémoire, Bell pinned her snapshots to hallway walls in her rented house. These snapshots may have remained little more than observational reminders of her accumulated city walks or as a resource for her sculptural installations had it not been for the encouragement of two visiting architects who saw in the hallway display a publishable project. However, Bell was not convinced that the project had merit until she sequenced her snapshots with vintage vernacular images culled from a vendor’s stall at a city book market.

Side-by-side, the new and old pictures made fitful but resonant companions. Where Bell isolated all but a single tree on a sidewalk or street in her color snapshots, the vernacular black and white images framed individual portraits, couples and family outings in, for the most part, tree-canopied landscapes. The stark contrast of city and country, present and past, time and space, unpopulated and populated views visually oscillate across the extended sequence of images. While traversing the streets and neighborhoods of Istanbul, Bell saw nature at once tortured and sheltered. In the found vintage photographs, however, she found nature as a welcome respite far removed from the densely crowded city. In Bell’s resulting illustrated book, *Visible From the Corner of My Eye*, the culture clash of images, in which the tree is omnipresent as a stand-in for all things natural, evokes the artist’s continuing investigation of the unsettling relationship between the natural world and the man-made.

THERESE MULLIGAN

Administrative Chair

School of Photographic Arts and Sciences

The first tree, five years later on the way to Gülüoğlu in Karaköy



The cut tree, at the edge of Macka Parki near Istanbul Technical University in Taksim



The limbless tree on Lüleci Hendek Caddesi, near DEPO in Tophane



The bare tree across from Süleymaniye Hamamı in Süleymaniye



The naked tree, along Dolmabahçe Caddesi, on the way to the studio in Beşiktaş



The remnant of a tree in the side walk, coming from Turkish class in Sultanahmet



The leaning tree in Nur's neighborhood in Cihangir



The blooming tree in front of Next Star at the tram stop in Karaköy



The artificial tree in the playground at the ferry terminal in Üsküdar



The dancing tree on the way to Ayse's house on the Asian side



The broken tree at the bottom of Boğazkesen Caddesi, near the tram stop in Tophane



The almost leaning tree on the way to Nur's house in Cihangir



The impounded tree in the park behind Kadir Has University in Cibali



The protected tree at the café in Fener



The stark tree in the parking lot behind Sokollu Mehmet Paşa Camii, in Sultanahmet



The wishing tree during the St George's day festival on Büyükkada.



COLOPHON

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