

Petja Grafenauer: The beauty of Ideology

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A German officer saw *Guernica* and, shocked at the modernist 'chaos' of the painting, asked Picasso: "Did you do this?" Picasso calmly replied: "No, you did this!"<sup>1</sup>

In 2005, in a quiet village in Istria, which is awakened from its doze only by the yearly influx of tourists, an alien element appears in the form of a little safari hut sitting in the branches of a tree, and suddenly exotic noises are heard all around. Jasmina Cibic's *Everybody for Safari* (2005), an unexpected invasion of the foreign in a space defined by its own politics and system, is thus an imposed experience.

According to the tourism market research group IPK International, travellers spent a total of 6.8 billion nights in overnight accommodation in 2012.<sup>2</sup> Travel and souvenirs, which remind us of our search for otherness, have become an enormous industry. The purpose of such travel is to seek out experiences that cannot be found in the place we live. The purpose of souvenirs is the (inevitably unsuccessful) attempt to re-experience otherness. But things get even more complicated when the original experience is the experience of a non-place.

Cibic's first projects were realized in "spaces of transit", the kind of spaces Marc Augé calls "non-places".<sup>3</sup> Originating in the period of supermodernity, these are distinguished from "places" by the fact that they are not connected to questions of identity, relationships, or history. They are spaces we barely notice – standardized places such as airports, waiting rooms, airplanes, hotels, shopping centres, and highways, which cater to certain precisely defined needs of individuals who, by entering the non-place, seem to shake off their everyday social bonds but who in the non-place – usually as a transitional area from one system to another – are themselves in fact defined by uniformity far more than in spaces tied to certain historical, relational, or identity specifications. The non-spaces, of course, only appear to be "empty" since behind them stands a powerful ideology – capital.

The inconspicuous uniformity and geographical nondescriptness of non-spaces make it easier for Cibic to impose otherness, to introduce an event in a space where we do not

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<sup>1</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*, Picador, New York, 2008, p. 17.

<sup>2</sup> IPK International, "Global Travel Trends 2012/13" (6 March 2013), [http://www.ipkinternational.com/uploads/media/IPK\\_Press\\_Release\\_2013\\_EN.pdf](http://www.ipkinternational.com/uploads/media/IPK_Press_Release_2013_EN.pdf) (accessed 23 April 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, tr. John Howe, Verso, New York and London, 2000.

expect events, since it always offers nothing but what it promises. The expectations of a person who uses the airport infrastructure are clear, and the parameters of operation precisely defined. People at airports seemingly become a unified mass of individuals, wholly subordinated to the same demands and rules in the effort to achieve the desired goal. The non-space is designed so we don't pay attention to it. In Cibic's project *Dictionary of Imaginary Places* (2006), the intrusion of a constructed reality that undermines expectations awakens the attention of the user of the seemingly unproblematic airport structure.

The recent entry into the EU meant increased air traffic, and in 2006, expansion work began at the airport. With expansion comes the redesign of infrastructure, producing changes in the airport visitor's experience. During the redesign, Cibic, in collaboration with the airport's engineers, uploaded a unique computer program to the airport's information systems. This replaced all titles of actual destinations displayed on the departures/arrivals board, with fictitious destinations from the *Dictionary of Imaginary Places*. This intervention happened with no prior notification to the public, when the passengers were waiting for the last flight of the day to Istanbul. The software Cibic used to transform information into dis-information, is the same program that now controls the growing database of actual places being fed to the departures/arrivals board at the airport.<sup>4</sup>

As a place of national borders, airports are also spaces where every new arrival is confronted by the local national ideology. In a Schengen Area terminal this encounter, for some, involves a ban on entry; for others, however, it happens as an innocent, tourism-encased celebration of national charms and values. In the project *Tourists Welcome* (2007), Cibic appropriates the strategies and tactics of the wider system of marketing national identities and communicates them in an unusual way – by imposing a visualization of this same national system. Only now this takes the form of a uniformed orchestra of Slovenian police officers, who for two hours, for invited guests and those who have just crossed the Schengen border, perform Donna Summer's "I Feel Love" and thus, through a disco number, make direct reference to the Slovenian tourist slogan *I Feel S(love)nia*.

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<sup>4</sup> Michelle Deignan, "Dictionary of Imaginary Places", in Jasmina Cibic, *Airport Projects*, ed. Simona Vidmar, Umetnostna galerija Maribor, Maribor, 2009. The book from which the fictitious destinations were taken is Alberto Manguel and Gianni Guadalupi, *The Dictionary of Imaginary Places*, rev. ed., Harcourt Brace, New York, 1999; orig. pub. 1980.

The photographs show two othernesses: a standardized alien place and an alien element that does not belong there. In the lambda prints in the project *The Greenhouse Effect* (2006) the artist's subtle strategy can be seen for the first time: she creates a total project that attains visibility in systems marked by outward appearance. The contemporary situation is also revealed through the aesthetics of artworks – luxury items in a world of fashionable objects. *JCOI-Lufthansa* (2006) again expresses in a non-place an important theme in Cibic's work: the system of hunting and subjecting animals to the structures humans place them in. The image of the souvenir in a non-place becomes even more explicit because of the unexpected element that evokes it: here antlers – as defined by national preferences – are mounted along the walls of an empty Lufthansa airplane. *Forged Territories* (2007) speaks very clearly about the fact that the introduction of a highly standardized aesthetic in a space changes the chance of any apparent concordance between the combined but actually discordant elements – a dead stuffed animal and a natural setting. The projects *Unrealized Locations* (2007) and *Boutique Airports* (2007) are also, in fact, aestheticized souvenirs of non-places – the supreme example of which is found in the series *Airport Art* (begun in 2005), where the image of the non-place is, among other things, realized in Idrija lace, the exquisite national craft for which Slovenia is known.

Cibic supplies experiences through her constructed total environments, performance installations, delegated performances, and highly aestheticized artworks, which are placed in the position of – or even themselves become – sophisticated souvenirs for the elite classes, assuming the role a fetishized “trigger” that produces an original feeling.

Collective experience is difficult for the artist to avoid; she can't help but convey it through her works. For this reason, her behaviour – in which she is conscious of her role and accepts it – is reliable on the level of transmitting information. It is the socially responsible act of exposing how structures operate.

*In the Gorges* (2006–2007), which developed at the same time as the airport projects, presents a series of drawings of places Karl May described in the work *In den Schluchten des Balkan* [In the gorges of the Balkans] (1892–1898), while the combined descriptions of these places are found in *The Dictionary of Imaginary Places* (1980). Cibic gave the texts to the police sketch-artist Boris Trobec, who made precise drawings on the basis of the descriptions.

When Karl May was writing about the Balkans – the northernmost part of which is also Slovenian national territory – he “took up certain long-standing stereotypes regarding the Balkans and the Orient and used them in a way that allowed him to work off what was

expected from his readers. This was the main source of his startling resonance.”<sup>5</sup> May was conscious of the stereotypes, which the police artist now expressed in precise visual form.

Similarly, in the project *Situation Anophthalmus hitleri* (2012) – the basis for the national presentation at the Venice Biennale, which Cibic addresses in her current installation – scientific illustrators created images of the Hitler beetle solely on the basis of a description. Among Slovenia’s national treasures, we must also include this endemic insect, which was given the name *Anophthalmus hitleri* by the entomologist and Hitler admirer Oscar Scheibel in 1937. The illustrations of the beetle, created from a neutral description, show how an image of the collective experience, merely by being marked with the word “hitleri”, is transferred even to an extremely learned and neutral scientific drawing.

The tactics of arousing the desire for an experience are the same tactics – necessarily used by the tobacco industry in advertising their products – in the project *Mythmaking as a Colonisation Tactic* (2007), which inhabited rooms at the Tobacco Factory in Ljubljana. The viewer is offered, not an experience, but a “snapshot” of one and thus “proof” that the experience exists. He is offered a vision of the happy fulfilment of his desires, or perhaps merely an image, a souvenir. The intimacy of the souvenir, which serves as an aid to remembering, is underscored by the subjectivity ascribed to the medium of drawing: these drawings show images of happy hunters, their friends and family, who, after the experience of a successful hunt, pose happily for the photographer’s lens with their dead prey in their arms, sharing their happiness with the public of the World-Wide Web.

In 2008, questions about the ideology of the exhibition space made their way into Cibic’s work, first in the series *Ideologies of Display* (2008). Early modernist drafts for cages in a zoo demonstrate the ideology of modernism: the animals are displayed in a way that puts them constantly on view to everyone from every angle. All is exposed, all is displayed; Foucault’s geometric panopticon has domesticated the animals in the Europeanized exoticism of cages and elevated the creatures of zoology to ordained elite objects, which become the property of the higher stratum of society while the lower strata can merely gaze at the animals’ placement in cages that copy the Orientalist architecture of their wealthy owners and “domesticate” the wildness of nature.

Cibic developed this project further with *The 20th Century* (2010), a series of photographs of hunting birds. Their owners exchanged the use-value of the birds for the cultivated

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<sup>5</sup> Peter Brenner of the Technological University of Munich, quoted in Lindita Arapi, “May turns clichés into colorful literary vision”, DW, <http://www.dw.de/may-turns-clich%C3%A9s-into-colorful-literary-vision/a-15845470> (accessed 31 March 2013).

experience of nature – the trophy, which conveys to the viewer not only what he sees but also a sense of the sentimental, cultural, social, and market value of its owner. The birds of prey rest on objects that originated in twentieth-century Western society as vehicles of the highest values, values that were supposedly poured into them by the hand of the creator of the experience, the artist. In the context of a collection, the hunting birds and the artworks they rest on are objects that are accessible to the viewer in the same way. The possibility of the experience is not dependent on whether the decision to include a work is of a personal, professional, commercial, ideological, or political nature. What makes the experience possible is not the object itself, but the contextual frame in which it is set.<sup>6</sup>

The artist was also drawn to ideologies of display when she brought the project *Other Mythologies* (2008) into the gallery. In a location strongly defined by history, identity, and attitudes (the Maribor Art Gallery venue was once a monastery church) she introduced the simulation of a non-space – a highly aestheticized technological waiting room of supermodernity – and included in it the ceiling painting from the former church tower, a mythology that was being created at the same time as the kind of mental images from the Balkan gorges Karl May was forging from stereotypes for his enthusiastic readers. On the ceiling, a myth about battles; on the walls, silkscreen prints of fantastic places in the Balkans on luminous black ceramic tiles. And a display board on a wall showing arrivals from and departures to imaginary places. A promise that will never be realized. Is this the promise offered by art?

The utopian desires of modernism – which in one of its variations hoped to escape objectification by ridding itself of decoration and becoming total functionalism – proved futile. Art, too, is and always was something that, despite all desires, could never escape reality. The dominant ideology was inherently inscribed even in the most radical ideas of modernism. Adolf Loos designed a modernist boudoir in the Villa Müller (1930) in Prague, which, in the project *The Object of the Spectacle* (2011), Jasmina Cibic realized with all its architectural features in a gallery space. Loos's boudoir was designed in such a way that a woman in the boudoir could observe the world in front of her without herself being observed by the world: the play of light and shadow turned her into an unrecognizable silhouette to anyone looking at her. In Cibic's reconstruction, the boudoir with Loos's architectural forms is no longer neutral, not even on the surface. Modernism with its functionality and apparent purity offered just another possible mask. Cibic reveals the boudoir as a space of gazing. She dresses it in wallpaper on which she presents the viewer with a collection of im-

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<sup>6</sup> Jasmina Cibic, in *An Idea for Living. Realism and Reality in Contemporary Art in Slovenia*, U3 - 6th Triennial of Contemporary Art in Slovenia. Moderna galerija, Ljubljana, 2010, p. 25

ages of hunting birds – objects of prestige that once stirred the desires and fantasies of the upper class but that today, in an age of spectacle, have turned into an empty sign of the desire for prestige felt by all strata of society.

In *The Return of the Real*, Hal Foster described a kind of art that is aware of the modernism that came before it; he distinguished between “retroversion” and “retroaction” in contemporary art works: while the first adopts the forms of modernism, but not its tactics, the second speaks of the experience of modernism with the help of indexical signs and reveals its problematic areas.<sup>7</sup> Cibic’s work can easily be read in the context of Foster’s description of the latter. In *Falcon Hood Study (A. Loos)* (2010), Cibic

re-examines the work of Adolf Loos and his writing from 1929 on Ornament and Crime where he states: “Ornament means wasted labour and therefore wasted health. Today, however, it also means wasted material, and both mean wasted capital.” Cibic uses the falcon hood with its intricate process of manufacture as an attribute of the animal it serves, thus becoming an art object which posits the hunting bird as a luxury commodity that also has the ascribed ability to trigger experience (the hunt). The personalisation of the hood (that has throughout centuries been executed by artists and assigned the added surplus value to the wearers and their collectors) reworks this 1929 text along with Loos’ notion of tattooing as an exoticism of ornamentation brought into the West where it exists merely as a “criminal and degenerate act” as “the evolution of culture is synonymous with the removal of ornamentation from objects of everyday use”. The artist has collaborated with tattoo artists, who have reworked Loos’ design objects into abstracted symbols executed in embroidery.<sup>8</sup>

After presenting the project *Spectral Metropole* (2012) in London, Cibic wanted to show her work *Bird Cage (After Pierre-Émile le Grain)* (2012) in Ljubljana as well; this project, however, included the involvement of a live element: a Harris hawk. The luxury bird travelled across borders with its trainer and, following the artist’s instructions, did its delegated performance at the Vžigalica Gallery in Ljubljana. For this to happen, however, the artist, the hosting art institution, and the bird had to comply with many bureaucratic demands; among

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<sup>7</sup> Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: Avant-garde at the End of the Century*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1996.

<sup>8</sup> Description of the project *Falcon Hood Study (A. Loos)*, in the publicity materials for Cibic’s exhibition *Flock* in Ersatz gallery in London, 2011.

other things, the hawk was forbidden to come into contact with other animals during its stay in Slovenia.

It's curious how, on the one hand, the state system can make use of an artist for its own (self-)presentation, as at the Venice Biennale, while on the other it can hinder her work, causing delays through the bureaucratic apparatus or even completely halting the artwork's realization, as in the case of the project *The Ambassadors*, in which an animal hide was installed "in one of the central squares in Maribor, Maister Square (formerly Lenin Square), opposite the monument to General Maister and the linden planted for the occasion of Slovene independence". Slovenian and Austrian hunters were supposed to perform a series of "vocal performances of the rut" with stag calls in four categories: "a stag in search of mares, a stag with a herd of [does] preventing them to escape, a stag with a herd of [does] to whom an older strong stag is approaching and a stag at the end of the rut."<sup>9</sup> The project was not carried out as originally planned, however, since the state – in the guise of the cultural preservationist profession – offered its opinion on whether an art project that exposes the structures of presentation was necessary: "Erecting a hunting lookout in a tree (in Slovenia hunters mainly use free-standing constructions) on the grounds of a city park, where city residents can see such a structure in its natural environment after a 15-minute drive, seems senseless and inappropriate."<sup>10</sup>

During Maribor's tenure as a European Capital of Culture in 2012, nationality was present as a touristic insert at every step, but history saved us with the Hitler beetle project. Cibic designed the installation to resemble the presentation of other Slovenian gems: exhibitions of Rogaška crystal, the boats of Lake Bled, Trubar's writings, the Freising Manuscripts, or the Human Fish – that is, as a strategic display of the national treasures aimed at tourists. The beetles were placed in modernist display cases, which the artist made in collaboration with the Slovenian factory that produces the prestigious Rogaška crystal – which for decades has been the leading manufacture of gifts for official state occasions. These crystal masterpieces were copies of the modernist pavilions designed for the Ljubljana Trade Fair by Vinko Glanz, one of the official architects of post-war Yugoslavia.

A few years ago, among Glanz's posthumous papers, the stenographic minutes were found from a session of the committee for reviewing the artworks and sculptures for the

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<sup>9</sup> Description of the performance, in the publicity materials for Cibic's installation *The Ambassadors* at the European Capital of Culture in Maribor, 2012. The terms in brackets are translator's correction of the original text.

<sup>10</sup> Statement by Miran Krivec, conservation consultant, Institute for the Protection of the Cultural Heritage of Slovenia, Maribor Regional Office, dated 18 September 2012.

new building of the Slovenian parliament, which the architect had designed in post-war Ljubljana. One of the integral parts of Cibic's project in Venice is a video installation based on the minutes of a discussion between politicians and art historians, which Cibic filmed exactly fifty-five years after the discussion between Glanz and the dignitaries.

Ideologies create reality. They intertwine themselves with it, hide in it, until eventually they become ordinary, natural, until they're part of everybody's consciousness. Cibic's art intervention slices into this "natural" state of affairs. It encourages us to ask ourselves about what today might seem self-evident to us, at a time when the state has not vanished in the flow of the global neoliberal order, although it has pulled back its left, social, arm from its citizens, while powerfully strengthening its right arm. What structure of ideology, then, hides behind the reality of the Venice Biennale? Jasmina Cibic is exhibiting *For Our Economy and Culture* (2013).

Petja Grafenauer