

Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez: Two subchapters to Jasmina Cibic's *Other Mythologies*

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"Not only are objects now generated and consumed, so are experiences and subjectivities. It is logical to assume, then, in the era of the spectacle, that theatricality has become one of the essential structural features of our culture, that it questions received ideas and has implications for our way of preserving recollections and of constructing memory [...] how are experiences, which are at once unrepeatable and infinite, collected? How does one render visible and transmit a work of a textual sort that has more to do with the archive and the document than anything else?"¹

The paradox of contemporary art and of the staging of the engaged experience

The artwork or project, which is taking shape within the period in which we live, almost automatically from the moment we start to conceive of it, sits between various readings. The experience and influence of the radical renewal of artistic creation and its discourse, throughout Europe and other continents from the end of the 1950s onwards, distanced art from aspirations towards autonomy so highly regarded by high modernism. It is now a commonly accepted fact that we apply an "*athletics of the eye*"² or rather an athletics of perception, bringing a broad range of references that are embedded within our first perception, first word, first thought about an artwork.

Here, we are speaking about a type of social consensus on the ontology of the artwork, which is made within the art system and inseparable from it. This consensus is multifaceted. We understand that, today, the personal is understood almost without

¹ Manuel Borja-Villel, "A Theater Without Theatre: The Place of the Subject", in: Bernard Blistène, Yann Chateigne (ed.), *A Theatre Without a Theatre*, Barcelona: Museu D'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA), 2007, p. 21.

² Cf. Eda Čufer, "Athletics of the Eye", in: *Maska*, No. 74–75, Ljubljana, 2002.

exception as political and that contemporary art's relationship with the political appears to now have an apolitical pose, often identifying non-production and de-production³ as a legitimate politically engaged aesthetic.⁴ We know that the legitimacy and value of contemporary art are ratified within an institutional framework and that all art production simultaneously carries an economic, social and political dynamic.

This all-encompassing framework, which everything appears subordinated to, is in many of its own pockets of resistance breeding a critique of its own image and encouraging different distribution and production models. It also advocates the consideration of the effectiveness of artistic projects, their gestures or suggestions, within a broader socio-political context. Further discourses regarding the alternatives, radicalisation or possible changes to the current condition are being explored by artists through their practices, and by philosophers, curators and critics such as Boris Groys, Brian Holmes, Geert Lovink, Chantal Mouffe or Jacques Rancière. The work of curators and critics in this area is closely connected to the so-called new wave of institutional critique.⁵ This is being executed particularly by curators within clearly established institutional strongholds, with self-critical and self-reflexive projects, that paradoxically also consolidate the model of institutional dominance.

Lately, two authors have written about this paradox: Boris Groys and Jacques Rancière. For Groys, the political effect of art is only possible outside of the art market – when the artwork is present within the context of direct political propaganda it loses its status as a commodity and becomes a "paradox-object" as: "every art work, presenting a

³ For an interesting interpretation of the notion of de-production as a possibility of simultaneous creation and non-creation instead of the economy of growth see the contribution by Tim Griffin: "Tino Sehgal: An Interview", in: *Artforum International*, Year XLIII, No. 9, May 2005.

⁴ This apparently paradoxical situation is mentioned also by Igor Zabel on the case of Mladen Stilinović: "If I take as an example the work of Mladen Stilinović, it has two lines: one is more explicitly political with references to Russian constructivism, political slogans and work problematic. And then we have the second line, which always deals with white, emptiness and empty time. I think that Stilinović is perhaps most political at the moment, when he demands this empty time from the viewer." Nataša Petrešin, "Potencialnost kulturnega uporništva. Conversation with Brian Holmes, Claire Pentecost, Marko Peljhan and Igor Zabel", in: *Maska*, No. 88–89, Ljubljana, 2004.

⁵ This notion was discussed in detail by Simon Sheikh in his essay "Notes on Institutional Critique", Vienna: eipcp, 2006, <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0106/sheikh/en>.

*vision that is guided by a specific religious or political ideology, makes this vision profane"*⁶; Rancière on the other hand, persistently develops his past thoughts regarding aesthetics and politics, their fiction and reality. In his latest book, in the chapter on the paradoxes of political art, he writes: *"If the aesthetic experience touches upon the political one, this is also due to its own definition as an experience of dissensus, which contradicts the mimetic or ethical adaptations of artistic production due to the attainment of social goals. Within this experience, artistic production loses its functionality and leaves the network of connections that gave it direction according to the expected effects behind; they are offered within a neutralised space-time ... The result is not the embodiment of certain knowledge, certain value or of habitus. On the contrary, it is a dissociation of a specific set of experiences."*

As if debating with Groys, Rancière with regards to his own analyses of concepts of reality and fiction, does not stand for the idea that political art could settle the accounts with its own paradoxes in the form of an intervention outside the spaces for art within the real world, as in his opinion, the real as a thing in itself doesn't exist: *"... there are configurations of that, what is given as our reality, as the object of our perception, thought and intervention. The real is always an object of fiction – that means a construction of space, where the visible, the sayable and the doable take shape. The dominant fiction, that means the fiction of consensus, is the one which denies its fictional character and proposes itself as real ... The work of politics, which invents new subjects, introduces new objects and a different perception of communal data, is a work of fiction as well. The relationship between art and politics is not the transition from fiction into the real, but the relationship between two modes of production of fiction."*⁷

With *Other Mythologies*, Jasmina Cibic for the first time re-presents a work originally conceived as an intervention in a public space, within the context of an art institution. This new installation re-configures elements from the work *Dictionary of Imaginary Places* that installed specific computer software into the existing information system at Jože Pučnik Airport, a site where she has realised many art interventions. This in-between, transitory and hybrid space is defined by migration of bodies and machines. Cibic's

⁶ Boris Groys, *Art Power*, Cambridge (Massachusetts) and London: The MIT Press, 2008, p. 8.

⁷ Jacques Rancière, *Le Spectateur émancipé*, Paris: La Fabrique éditions, 2008, p. 84.

theoretical writing follows on from the work of Marc Augé, describing this space as devoid of potential experience and indefinable as public space.

Cibic's engagement with this is not just reflected by the nature of her interventions into these non-places, but through the dual positioning of these works within the context of art and as a lived experience for the "casual passer-by" at a certain time and in a certain space, when the situation takes place. The fictitious names from *Dictionary of Imaginary Places*, displayed on the airport's arrivals and departures board, present themselves as plausible offerings of real destinations. This reflects the general fictionalisation of the everyday and the expectancy built into forecasts of our future experiences that we are regularly manipulated by as users, consumers or active subjects.

Other Mythologies translates this particular intervention into a filmed recording of the same information board under the conditions created by *Dictionary of Imaginary Places* and projects the result as a two-channel High Definition video work. The documentation of an "off-site" project is necessary within the unwritten "legislation" of the art world, which legitimises activities happening outside the space of art only through visibility and objectivity such as a translation into photographs.

Does this action of translation in the case of *Other Mythologies* mobilise an alternative discourse to ones posited by the employment of other modes of documentation associated with actions outside of the institution? We can namely look at Cibic's strategy as an approach to the theatrical category of the 'performative document', described by Philip Auslander, with the potential of re-enactment and experience.

The performative document

The American theoretician Philip Auslander in his seminal text about the performative

embedded in the performance documentation⁸, references his colleague, performance theoretician Amelia Jones, who in her seminal essay *Presence in Absentia* explores the relationship between performance and document, reinstating photography's position as an access point to the reality of performance.⁹ Following on from this argument, Auslander classifies documentary and theatrical strand of performance documentation. Under the latter he includes projects where the performance is totally staged with the sole purpose of being recorded as the event bears no preceding meaningful existence whatsoever: "*The space of a document, be it visual or audiovisual, becomes the only space in which the performance takes place.*"¹⁰ Theatrical documentary photography can be understood as performance documentation, as we are not only presented with a captured reality or situation, but its production. With theatricality comes the diminished credibility of the document's authenticity and its ability to reflect reality. The effect is that the spectator does not see it as communication of information but the staging of information, which can be understood as a social action that influences the relations between the involved subject and objects.

Framing the projection space in *Other Mythologies* are walls covered in silk-screened black ceramic tiles showing images that are a product of Cibic's collaboration with a police sketcher. Her descriptions of non-existing places, adopted from the reference book *Dictionary of Imaginary Places*, receive domestic and probable traits, which combined with her imagination and invention, are deciphered by the skill of the police sketcher in order to render the vision of the artist as a true experience. Cibic also uses this type of self-authorisation as a creative strategy as part of her project *Airport Art*. Here, the works are visual translations of plan views of spacecrafts based on descriptions from science fiction novels that have been crafted in traditional lace by women workers in Idrija, Slovenia.

⁸ Philip Auslander, "On the Performativity of Performance Documentation", in: Barbara Clausen (ed.), *After the Act. The (Re)Presentation of Performance Art*, Vienna: MUMOK, 2005.

⁹ Amelia Jones writes: "*Although I am respectful of the specificity of knowledges gained from participating in a live performance situation, I will argue here that this specificity should not be privileged over the specificity of knowledges that develop in relation to the documentary traces of such an event. While the live situation may enable the phenomenological relations of flesh-to-flesh engagement, the documentary exchange (viewer/reader – document) is equally intersubjective ...*", *Art Journal*, Winter, 1997, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0425/is_n4_v56/ai_20544717/pg_1?tag=content;coll.

¹⁰ Cf. op. No. 8, p. 24.

These are products of a "delegated execution of work", a protocol of detailed instructions for executing work, as is understood within the framework of the unified concept of "delegated performance" by the English art critic Claire Bishop, positing different relational and conceptual practices from 1990s onwards from Eastern and Western Europe and both Americas within it.¹¹ In Bishop's opinion, compared to the conceptual and body art that arose in the 1960s and 1970s, today's generation of artists are much more interested in strategies of transfer, authorisation and participation. In this way, the authority and the authenticity of the artist's position of declaration and creation are purposefully questioned. At the same time these artists encourage unpredictability, risk, and in some cases, radical problematisation of the ethics of doing so. In the case of Cibic, the police sketcher drawings are documents which firmly instate this performative situation as the ontological basis of the project, creating a new reality onto which the imagination and the data base of experiences of each individual who confronts these works is bound.

¹¹ <http://www.interregnum.dk/Pdfpanel/Bishop,%20Claire%20.pdf>