

Simona Vidmar: Airport Projects, an interview

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**Simona Vidmar** In your works, you deal with two of the elementary moments of being: space and experience. More about experience itself later, as I would wish to begin our conversation with the meaning, characteristics and suggestions of the notion of space in your work. *Airport Projects* is a series of works realized within airports and about airports, spaces characterized with a lack of nationality, where anonymity guarantees a moment of being without an established identity. In the last three years, with your performative interventions and spatial installations you have deliberately entered this distinctive *non-space*; more concrete, airport departure lounges and empty airplanes have become the locations of your event/installation staging (such as the intervention within the Lufthansa and Turkish Airlines airplanes in 2006; the manipulation of the airport departure board in *Dictionary of Imaginary Places*, 2006; performative actions on the airport runway in collaboration with the Kranj Brass Band in *Boutique Airports*, 2007; up to the seizing of the departure lounge within the airport's terminal for the delegated performance/installation *Tourists Welcome*, 2007; and the spatial intervention within the Maribor Art Gallery, the installation *Other Mythologies*, where a transitional *non-place* interferes with the authority of a museum, 2008). This is a long-term process, which has taken place over many years, summarized with the title *Airport Projects*. Can you tell us how this unusual affair with airports came about in the first place?

**Jasmina Cibic** My first projects were of a performative nature and created actions and interventions, where I was mostly interested in connections between the artist, the artefact and the public and the different types of dialogues, which could be created this way. It was only accidentally that the situation arose, where I began to think in detail about the architectural form, which gives space to performative interventions or the artefacts themselves. I got interested especially in the (former) public spaces due to their inherent characteristic – the orientation toward a specific user. I could probably attribute this to my obsession with how can art still step into the dialogue with its own

live model, and with this the legacy of the historic avant-garde. I began to observe and research the function of the individual within specific spaces and the formulated relationships between them, where I began to differentiate between a tourist, a casual passer-by and a "mere" spectator. Here, different functions meant different levels of individual engagement with her/his surrounding and her/his relationship to it.

It is a different question altogether, what happens when an artist imposes a specific experience to the public and within what type of a space does this take place. An action/performance intervention which takes place within a museum is a propos understood as fiction, if not for other reasons, solely due to the nature of its surrounding architectural engagement. Transitional spaces, or how

Marc Augé recaps them – *non-places* – intrigued me precisely because of their relationship with experience – these are namely spaces, where the latter never takes place, even though its promise remains inherent throughout their architectural form. At the same time, I was interested in who holds sufficient authority within the contemporary condition to guarantee the truth of experience. This is how my work with the insertion of a paradigm of a personal system into the existing, rigid systems of airports and other transitional spaces began, as it is within the latter where the existence of authority and the passenger's commitment to it is an undisputable fact.

**Simona Vidmar** Staging of impossible reality (the invasion of the exotic ambient into the aged Istrian village in *Everybody for Safari*), forging of reality (the collection of fictitious places from history of literature for the display of the departure board in the *Dictionary of Imaginary Places*), imitation of authenticity (the uniformed performance at the Ljubljana Airport in *Tourists Welcome*) and expropriated myths (the interweaving of facts with fiction in *Other Mythologies*) are themes and methodologies we can follow in your work, which all deal with experience – the other domineering moment of your projects. It looks as though all chosen tactics are used with a purpose of obstruction or expropriation of real experience, or better – the experience of the real.

On a poster within one of Martha Rosler's photographic works from the series about airport architecture (*In the Place of the Public: Observation of a Frequent Flyer*, O'Hare, Chicago, 1982-), we can read *Maybe there is a substitute for experience*. What happens in

your works with experience as the base of cognition, and what can it be substituted with?

**Jasmina Cibic** I do not believe it is so much the expropriation of experience than a fabrication of a new one that is staged by a paradigm of some personal system – in this case my artistic practice. At the same time, we are dealing with the problem of how can an artwork leave the context of its commencement and at the same time still carry this same context with it, without regard to its possible transfers (Marina Gržinič's idea of cultural reactors) into other situations. When I reach into what appear to be specific geo-political situations (the village Momiano in Croatian Istria or the Ljubljana Airport in the above-mentioned projects), I wish for all the localities to remain abstracted enough and cleansed of the details of their belonging where they, more than of geo-political specificities, speak of the nature of experience within the contemporary condition.

The above listed projects, due to their temporal nature, carry similar characteristics to a structure of myth – and who has not experienced them, can only refer to eyewitness' accounts. The primary audience without doubt understands these projects differently than the one, which gains only indirect accounts of it.

The problem of not only just site-specific works but also all those that carry embedded within their fabric a specific temporal and contextual framework is their representation. Even more – their documentation establishes a new reality, which in fact suggests a completely different experience of the artwork, than the one given to the primary audience of its presentation. My project *Other Mythologies* in Maribor Art Gallery dealt precisely with this problem: how can one *transfer* an intervention from the outer (former) public space back into the gallery institution, where, instead of merely representing the past intervention/action, the transferred artwork literally *translates* into another work?

**Simona Vidmar** Let us distance ourselves from real spaces (as you said these are of interest to you typologically and not so much politically) and close in on the references that are a constant in your work and which in certain aspects appear as the main carriers of the projects. On one side, these references seem to be, once again, geo-political (the series of drawings *In the Gorges* was made after the fantasy travelogue novel by Karl

May *In the Gorges of the Balkans*) and on the other, they are posited within the market reality of the new economy (appropriation of tourist slogans in *Tourists Welcome*). The intra-connections of certain traumatic experiences from the (almost) past, with which the space of the Balkans and/or Eastern Europe is equipollated with, discharge themselves from their historical load by playing off the latest ideas of marketing propaganda. Is the political and ethnic exotic, in this case of an Eastern European artist as a "representative of a different and exotic culture" (Igor Zabel), actually less indicative and does the East for you also become a mere "souvenir"? Or is it the so-called *alter-modernity*, an era of mobility, travel, cultural exchange and a space without a common epicenter (in difference to the post-modern burden with the phenomenon of origin and identity) the space that defines you?

**Jasmina Cibic** The interesting point within the thesis about *alter-modernity* is its marking with translation – where, as argues Bourriaud, we, its members, enter an "era of universal subtitling and generalized dubbing". The artists today are utilizing new modes of operation, where instead of destinations, trajectories themselves are manifested (and materialized) and where the question of the "exotic nature" of the artist's origin seems irrelevant. What is becoming the desired "other locality" that is supposed to be brought to life by the artwork, is the one bound to similar mechanisms to those characterizing the outside model with its marketing grips of creation of desire and the maintenance of fantasy far from its realization.

Within the space of contemporary art market, where local specificities of artistic practices depict themselves as desired exoticisms, it seems a valid question to ask ourselves the one about the nature of this locality and its homogeneity or difference. What is brought into the equation within the distribution of the system of global capitalism is, on one side, precisely the production of the latter, presenting an upheaval of local specificities that are exportable into whichever context, and on the other, the idea of nomadic approach (Deleuze and Guattari) where we speak of a fluid subjectivity, identity and spaciousness. It is then not surprising if contemporary art practices deal with the awakening of uniqueness of space and authenticity of memory, history and identity as the differential functions of space, which does not function as a neutral space within which

social relations are formulated, but adapts to global capitalism in terms of its abstraction of space and the creation of *non-places*.

In order for contemporary art to be critically engaged, it has to set itself against the strategies of global market, its alienation and fragmentation. It is precisely the relationship between the artwork and its viewer, which in this case is of fundamental importance: when an artwork claims a position outside the museum and relocates to the (former) public space, the spectator transforms into a beholder, tourist or a voyeur. It is his gaze which the artwork now "serves". Or, if we summon up Groys' statement: it is the gaze of the tourist, which in a similar way as a museum does to an artwork, donates an aura to an attraction. The artist in such a way becomes not only a *homo viator*, as is argued by Bourriaud, but a creator of an itinerary channeled specifically toward the spectator. Even more: it is not only the specificity of space that influences her/his dialogues with the artwork, but also the specificity of time.

The geographical traumas of specific territories and the packaged exotic of their ethnic and political specificities are as such within the contemporary condition considered irrelevant. More focus ought to be shed onto the time loop of the historical accession, where by stepping into the past/future, the artist can exploit specific art-historic/socially engaged facts in order to delineate new realities. Following this line of thought, I am personally interested in certain solutions of the historic (eastern) avant-garde, where its inherent aesthetics did not represent solely formal solutions, but also spoke of the background of the whole surrounding socio-political system. In this moment, when we can observe numerous reappropriations of the aesthetics of that era, it is worthwhile to ask what exoticisms this turn into the past brings about and what meaning is carried within their specificity of form. Is this only a tourism of formalisms, which subconsciously gives a feeling of presence of an authoritative narrative to the spectator, or does the artist with their referencing manage to bring to the table the whole palette of their deeply anchored social connotations?

**Simona Vidmar** I would like to open another one of the key moments in your projects – that is their explicit accessibility, which, together with communicability, humor, usefulness and participation, is embedded within the process of production and presen-

tation. The installation *Other Mythologies* in the Maribor Art Gallery is one of the few projects you have created specifically for the museum space. As you said, your projects have mostly appeared outside the museum territory. Once realized, they test the role of the casual passer-by, or classic tourists as (non-voluntary) users of the artwork. Yet, as is less familiar, in your works you systematically include "casually chosen" participators already within the process of production. Almost all of your projects have namely arisen by empowering other producers to create by following the artist's direction (as for example the multiple performance of the police orchestra within various locations of Ljubljana Airport for the project *Tourists Welcome*; the series of drawings *In the Gorges* produced by the police sketcher after the artist's description; the lace of the space craft *Airport Art* in the execution of the Idrija school of lace). Does the method of participation present a starting point for your work, or is it more a consequence of delegated performance as an ontological base for your projects?

**Jasmina Cibic** As I have already mentioned the historical avant-garde and my interest in its methodologies and strategies, it seems right to come back to it one more time in this case: as the historical avant-gardes characteristically aestheticized their live model, the authority of the artwork in that case only came to be exclusive because of the existing aesthetic authority of the artist. With the employment of delegated execution of work, I am more intrigued by the aesthetic authority of the work, which is a product not only of the artist's vision, but also of the set of rules and methods of the given project and its participants. I am not so much interested in the first instances of the enforcement of the term "participatory art practices", which is bound to the gallery space, but the dialogue, which arises between participatory practices and the audience when these practices interfere with the "outside" space: when the artwork steps outside of the museum and loses the distinction of *the difference beyond difference* (of the artwork against the "matter itself"), as it is understood by Boris Groys. I am not claiming that *non-places*, such as transitional spaces like airports, are democratic, but that within their rigorous and authoritative form the same rules are in operation for all of their participants, what is on the other hand not valid for a museum. This sameness is also a necessary pre-requisite for a formulation of a common political

ground. The main problem of participation as an artistic strategy is surely the fact that it is already deeply embedded within the live model. When art practices use it as a methodology to reinstate critical validity, the artist must therefore establish a "strategic behavior within the symbolic field of the art system" (Igor Zabel). The question however remains: toward what paradigm of a system does this lead us to? Here I agree with the proposition of the British critic Claire Bishop who argues that whatever the result, it is surely not one, which would sacrifice aesthetics on the altar of social change.

The delegated execution of work (the drawings made in collaboration with the police sketcher and the execution of lace within the project *Airport Art*), formed a part of a research of how the process of creating an artwork can still radiate back from the art object itself, and how we can achieve a translation of participatory engagement of a non-gallery based, performative action into a static artwork exhibited within the apparatus of the museum (an establishment of the dialogue between an experience and its souvenir).

Within my practice, I choose the medium according to a specific idea and the nature of the project. I never start with a chosen strategy beforehand. I believe that participation and delegated execution of objects, which find themselves amongst the chosen tactics I employ, act more as a reaction to the relation between art and its live model. Here I equipollate the gallery audience with casual passers-by, tourists and flaneurs, and I allow the artwork to reach towards the same production mechanisms as the ones inherent within the elements of the surrounding reality.

**Simona Vidmar** Let me conclude with a personal reading of your work. Along with the multilayered narrative orientation and an interesting problematization of art historical origins, your works are for me firstly a highly aestheticized experience. Within the set up of installations, performance or documents of interventions one can detect absolute control of the artist's authority, which can therefore realize itself as cleansed and without mistakes and deviations.

Away from the political discourse of aesthetics as a manipulative tool of art, can art for you (also) represent pleasure?

**Jasmina Cibic** The connection between art and politics (Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*) lies within the fact that these are both fields where a struggle for recognition, the placement within the visual field of the spectator, or the casual passer-by is being fought. If I continue this thought and connect it to Agamben's notion of the *state of exception* (meaning the subject is embedded within a specific system where at the same time the inherent law of the system for it is suspended), it seems we have reached precisely the point, which every artwork strives toward in order to reach this visible field, which Rancière speaks about – or to return to Groys one more time: *the difference beyond difference*, perhaps even without the necessary presence of the architectural and ideological apparatus – the museum. It is for this reason that within my works I employ a certain aesthetic where the product is highly articulated and bears in most cases a rigid and formalist expression, just like the products of the surrounding system of global capitalism, especially the ones that offer to their user some kind of experience. For me, this is a mode of setting up a structure where the elements alone produce the rules, which at the same time generate the structure itself.

I focus more on the sole construction of the situation/intervention and the process that runs alongside than on the modes of participants' involvement or a proclamation of a democratic, forged territory created for the purpose of the project. My projects can be separated in two categories: on one hand, I am speaking of a dramaturgy of experience and on the other of its souvenirs (objects, products that speak of the latter or announce its arrival).

At this point, I can finally return to the question of the correlation between art and pleasure: the promise of experience, which in such a way is foretold, realized or merely referred to through a set of artefacts that lure the spectator (with its seductive image similarly to how the capitalist apparatus of production operates), is simultaneously a promise of pleasure. To summarize: I believe it is more relevant to focus on the nature of the encounter of aesthetic experience than on the production of aesthetic enjoyment.