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damir očko | studies on shivering: the hunt

In early 2014, Damir Očko presented his major show *Studies on Shivering* at the Künstlerhaus Graz. As a conclusion of an almost two-year long productive research, the exhibition studied the irrepressible body reflex of shivering and its link with social context. It featured the new film *TK* and various materials, including works on paper, poetry, sound installations and objects.

At the Kasia Michalski Gallery in Warsaw, *Studies on Shivering* takes a new path, one concerned with exhibiting the means of production rather than repeating the encyclopedic display of this two-year long project: instead of making an already existing exhibition project travel to a new address, the artist reshapes its context: the film becomes replaced by the critical work questioning the process of filming.

The artist's decision not to present *TK*, the film that served as a central hub for the exhibition at the Künstlerhaus Graz, opened a question whether or not it is possible to exhibit the presence of the film by other means. As a result, two groups of works are shown in the exhibition. The first relates to *Studies on Shivering*, directly allocating the traces of the Graz exhibition. For example, the spatial distortion between the 16mm projection of a study of the bite (*Study on Shivering no.4*) contrasts with the sound of the bite itself presented as a sound installation elsewhere (*Study on Shivering no.5-2*). On the other hand, another group of photo-collages made from the production set photos address the film and the process of filmmaking and show how rough and open the process of shooting was.

More than just showing the mechanism of filming, the exhibition shows the kind of violence that was part of this particular film set. *TK*, much concerned with the aspects of violence, followed a group of young men attempting to withstand harsh winter conditions in their naked and unprotected appearance. What these photo-collages show is an utterly unfair, cruel and violent situation: the appropriately dressed film crew filming the above mentioned group of young men cramping and experiencing the pain in what looks like a well planned hunting scene.

Proposing the film without the film, the exhibition opens a space for questions. Being self-critical towards one's own production methods, Očko reassesses the creative process.

Damir Očko

Damir Očko creates films, photography, installations and objects including sound, poetry and works on paper – which document the creative investigations developed in the main film oeuvre of the artist. Očko has exhibited, among others, in Palais de Tokyo in Paris, at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Zagreb, Künstlerhaus Halle für Kunst und Medien in Graz and the Centre for Contemporary Art Zamek Ujazdowski in Warsaw. His works can be found in the collections of Louis Vuitton Foundation for Creation and CNAP - Centre national des arts plastiques in Paris or at the MUDAM in Luxembourg. He will represent Croatia in the forthcoming 2015 Venice Biennale.

Bice Curiger

After being curator at Kunsthau Zürich for 20 years, Bice Curiger is currently working as the Artistic Director of the Vincent van Gogh Foundation in Arles. She was the chief curator of *ILLUMinations* - the 54th edition of the Venice Biennale (2011). She curated or co-curated exhibitions for numerous contemporary art galleries and museums worldwide, and has published many books and articles. In 1984, she co-founded *Parkett*, a contemporary art magazine issued bi-annually in English in German, and since then is its editor-in-chief.

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Dear Damir,

Thank you, I am very grateful for this material and the more I study it, the more I am fascinated and drawn into it...

I will try my first question:

I was thinking about the specific “nakedness” of the two protagonists in TK. The men look athletic and strong, but they give you the impression of plucked birds. There is a total lack of eroticism. Helplessness and inward movement are the dominant elements. It made me think about The Scream by Edvard Munch as a contrasting pole. There, the whole environment is taken up by the hot “centrifugal” energy of the scream, while in TK you have these fragile, vulnerable creatures trembling quietly surrounded by nature, radiantly beautiful and impassive in its coldness. You see that I make a distinction between hot and cold, comparing aural and visual means of expression. How do you see this possible connection between temperature, colors and sound, related to human emotions?

I hope this is a possible start?

Best wishes,

Bice

Dear Bice,

You are very kind for taking the time to dwell into my works!

Your first question is a great start. Very relevant!

In a way, I am interested in the question of what it means to be a human today, as a social and political subject. Emotions describing our social presence today strongly oppose each other, such as love and hate, fear and the sense of security — it's kind of an emotional friction. There is a line from TK describing exactly that: “to kiss with teeth”. What I tried to describe with it is an act of violence inspired by the idea of love. Temperature that runs the film is based on a contradiction. On one level, the bodies are exposed, vibrating, losing control, moving involuntarily, and on another level the sounds, produced by various pressures applied on strings, are trying to warm things up. Each sound is a result of an extreme friction between bow and strings. The moments when tones appear within the hissing noises are the moments when strings reach another level of temperature, due to the changes in friction and pressure. There is a friction between what you hear and what you see in the film as well. Bodies crumble under exposure, but the struggle to keep control becomes more apparent.

I am looking forward to hearing your thoughts on this and hope this answers your question.

All the best,

Damir



IN TRANQUILITY THERE IS NO BURDEN



Dear Damir,

The trembling, the shivering and the onomatopoeic “TK” evoke percussive sounds. At the same time it seems obvious that you are interested in the syncopation, in the deviation of the expected, the normal flow. This is also apparent in many of your other works, like for instance the stuttering of the voice in “We saw nothing but the uniform blue of the sky”. One follows this rhythmically interrupted voice and at the same time there is so much wind and harmonious movements in the image of the beach, the sea and the sky. Is the syncopation also a metaphor for the artist’s role in society?

Best wishes,

Bice

Dear Bice,

Well yes. In a sense, harmony becomes obvious with the dissonance, and vice versa. As I see it, the social constraints build most of modern society, and my interest in the relationship between the dissonant and the harmonic is that of a syncopator for sure. But when I use the stuttering voice to read my poems, it is less to disrupt the flow of the image — since the complex film set was initiated on the beach without clear knowledge of what was going to happen — but more to disrupt the poem itself. This was the first time that I felt that the very personal and subjective language of poetry became a political one. For this reason, I was very focused on how to proceed in order to communicate the correct meanings throughout the film, to the point where that syncopation you speak about became present and clear. In TK, something similar happened when the old man who suffers from Parkinson writes down the lines in which the state of tranquility is described: it is a political gesture because how and what he sets on paper become the only way to provide the simple words with these precise meanings. The state he describes is conditional, but it is also disruptive in its own core.

All my best,

Damir







IN TRANQUILITY THE WORD IS

SHIVERING TO THE SHIVERING WORD









Dear Damir,

That makes me think of the paradox of the “mute singer” in “The Moon shall never take my Voice” with its subtitle “Three songs for a muted voice and various sounds”. It is the external, the added sound which makes the woman sing – or at least gives us the certainty that she is not just an actor but a singer, someone embedded in a musical score, someone who is in resonance, from her inner self reaching out into the space. This space, which in your work poetically reaches out even into the universe...

So here you make a strong point about the filmic reality and its possibilities, its magic potential. At the same time there is always a complete transparency about the real facts, that the singer is mute and expressing herself with body and sign language.

As you mention politics: the arresting beauty and the hypnotic effect of this film have also to do with the fact that what usually is perceived as an affliction becomes, in an act of “détournement”, an instrument to overcome the restraints of common languages.

(More to come soon... Sorry for the delay!)

Best,

Bice

Dear Bice,

The singer may be mute, but she isn't voiceless at all. What I mean is that I am thinking about the territorial aspect of the voice, meaning, what it means to have or not to have a voice, a voice that makes us humans. In fact, this was the first of my films where I decided to work with human voice, that is, a voice that becomes a gesture, and that has space outside of the vocal apparatus due to language barriers. As the film happened, this voice overcame its limits and was vocalized by voicelessness: a voiceless voice, without sound and language limits.

At the very beginning, it was difficult to negotiate the idea of "music" to a deaf performer, but as we progressed, slowly, the music got stripped down to its own basics: it became mostly temporal, and, as a consequence, its various other relations were easily translatable into objects, texts, movements. In sum, using other means for representative ends opened a universe of possibilities. Language became the same as music, and music became the same as performance, which became the same as film.

To answer your other question, my interest in film pertains to how the durational aspects of its materials — such as poetry, music, movements and narratives — are created in the particular physical space of the film, between the endlessness of the camera's gaze and the limits of the frame itself. In other words, I think about the film as a space for constructive interpretation. I would rather focus on the space I can open inside a film than on the film as a medium. This closed context gives direction and freedom to my work, as opposed to other potential contexts in contemporary art where harsher restrictions would make this endeavor a difficult task!

All my best,

Damir





Dear Damir,

You based your piece “The Age of Happiness” on research you did on the composer Aleksandr Scriabin and his incomplete work “Mysterium”. In 1902, he wrote: “There will be no spectators, all will become participants”. Through this statement, he is describing a future with a completely new culture, encompassing sound, visual effects, dance and even “a procession and incense and rhythmic textural articulation”, while the architecture should “continually change with the aid of mists and light”. He happened to be a synesthesist, that is, a person whose hearing experience is connected to the simultaneous perception of specific colors. He also created a light piano... Now, this strong visionary ideas and energy seem to be so completely opposed to our current state and feeling, and yet, there is a fascination in the strong engagement of all the senses in such a radical way. Can you explain? After all the title you chose is a strong statement.

Best wishes,

Bice

Dear Bice,

This is a rather 'young' work of mine, but I remember clearly the starting point of this project, which was the feeling that my generation, oppressed by the arbitrary aspects of its social surroundings, had no clear vision of the future. By vision, I mean foresights similar to the ones Scriabin had in creating a magical instrument that would change the world—as crazy as they may have seemed to us. Although we feel that the world needs a shift, we are not making this happen, hence our lack of vision. We don't believe in magical instruments, and that is understandable, of course; however, this pragmatism we all relate to made me wonder what a generation of pure happiness would really mean if it existed today. In the film, due to their lack of vision, blindfolded protagonists are guided by hypnotic sounds towards an undefined construction with no definite answer. I felt as if through this project, I was describing our confused and hypnotized generation, desperately looking for the age of happiness, simultaneously full of hope and helplessness.

All the best,

Damir







INTRAMUILLI

WIND

THERE IS NO GERMING















Dear Damir,

Here you'll find the final question:

The principle of collage is in the very center of your work and seems to connect two strong strains in art history reaching back to the heritage of Viktor Shklovsky and of Max Ernst: the collision and the fusing of images, sound and text in film and works of art. In today's world the "Collage Principle" has taken possession of our lives in the most sophisticated way, in its incredible and sometimes also frightening reach into our psyche and our thinking.

Are artists and is art — with its great protagonists of the past — going to give us hope? To recognize possible, not yet perceived potentials in the evolution of technology?

Best,

Bice

Dear Bice,

I would say that the principle of collage you mentioned gives a possibility of an extended duration, quite similar to the one provided by the space of film. This is something that would interest me in this sense. But coming back to your question: I don't know if an artist could or should give hope to anybody. The notion of hope is just too contaminated by the political discourse nowadays, and I feel it would be dangerous for an artist to aspire to such a consolatory role in society. Who is "us" in your question? Why is there a boundary between artists and the rest of society? To whom should the artist bring hope? These are all important questions for me. I believe that we all, artists and non-artists, participate in the reality together. I need hope as much as everybody else, and this is what I am trying to say with my works: we are all the same body, restrained by the uniformed political realities no matter how different their methods are. We need to work together. This is my vision.

All the Best

Damir

Proofreading

Klara Czerniewska
Katarzyna Barbotin-Larrieu

Graphic design, print and binding

Rafał Bagiński

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