

VINCENT HONORÉ, DORA GARCÍA: INTERVIEW 17.02.2009

Vincent Honoré: I wanted to ask about the main background of the exhibition at galerie Michel Rein, its points of departure.

Dora García: ... In 2008, I realized a series of performances, heirs of The Beggar's Opera of 2007 in Münster Sculpture Projects¹, where the main focus was on the very delicate equilibrium and fine tuning that must exist between an author and his/her public, between an actor and his/her audience, and between an artist and his/her spectators. This issue had been addressed in works such as The Sphinx, Letters to Other Planets, and The Messenger², but now, after The Beggar, it was ready to assume a greater narrative weight. A very clear and permanent model has always been Dan Graham's performance performer/audience/mirror (1977)³...

VH: Why this work by Dan Graham?

DG: This work has always haunted me, meaning different things as time passed by. Right now, two things in it are especially important for me: the notion of real-time narrative (to describe an action as it is happening, with description and action mutually unsettling each other) and the idea of making the audience the object of the work, not the recipient. There is nothing more than artist and audience (art object is therefore eliminated). A third thing, too: the artist forces the audience to abandon the position of spectator through sheer embarrassment...

VH: Often, to start with, your work is rooted in extensive research, an archaeology of its context, an investigation of the situation the work will address, or where it will be realised. Your works question the conditions of their appearance. What's the situation with this show?

DG: ... Curiously, I could find very similar structures in first-rate comedians such as Lenny Bruce and Andy Kaufmann. In particular, at the Sydney Biennale, I came upon this story: Lenny Bruce had been booked to perform in Sydney for one week in 1962. The first evening he performed, while walking to the stage and being fairly high on drugs, he couldn't find his way among all the curtains and then opened one of those curtains, discovering an enormous mirror that reflected the audience, upon which he exclaimed: WHAT A FUCKING WONDERFUL AUDIENCE! It was the first time that the word "fuck" had been uttered in a public venue in Australia. According to witnesses, the silence that came after it was reminiscent of the silence after a bomb being dropped. Someone called the police and Lenny Bruce was arrested and never allowed to perform again in Australia. A good story and a clear case of lack-of-balance between audience and actor. This story lies at the origin of one of the videos I will show in the exhibition, Just because everything is different it does not mean that anything has changed: Lenny Bruce in Sydney. What would Lenny Bruce have said to his Sydney audience had he been given the chance to speak, and what about if that day was no longer in September 1962, but by some sort of quantum leap, was 19 June 2008? ...

VH: Tell us about the other works that will complete the exhibition. They are being shown for the first time in Paris.

DG: From the Lenny Bruce piece came two performance pieces: What a Fucking Wonderful Audience, and two, The artist without works: a guided tour around nothing. Both use the format of "deranged" guided tours. The first one has as context the Sydney Biennale 2008 and revolves around three master pieces of audience-embarrassment: La Société du Spectacle (Debord), Cosmococas (Oiticica)⁵ and Kunst Kick (Burden)⁶. The second one evolves from this first one and from Jean-Yves Jouannais's magnificent book of Artistes sans oeuvres. It presents the possibility of visiting the works of an artist who does not produce any.

VH: You mention Guy Debord. I wanted to ask you about your relationship with Situationism. Do you follow a program somewhat inherited from Situationism? For instance, you dismiss the spectator. Instead you call for the actor, your works are accessible only for those who play them, play with them, etc.

DG: I do not have a conscious relation with Situationism. I believe I have been more conscious about heirs of the Situationists (distant cousins, probably) such as Group Material⁷. And indeed I try to make it impossible for the spectator to maintain his role: he is forced to adopt a position. But no one has a complete picture of the work, the spectator, the actor, myself, we all have partial views, in a literal sense.

VH: Back to the exhibition, how are you presenting the performances?

DG: ...In the exhibition, these performances (What a... and The artist without...) are presented by means of their scripts and the "props" used to perform them: annotated text cards, newspapers, and photographs. Both performances quote a fragment of the famous Peter Handke's play *Insulting the audience*. This idea of "insulting the audience" lies at the basis of the other two video works in the exhibition: *The Innocents* and *M*A*S*H*. The first one is a collaboration with GLAD TEATER8 the only theater company I know composed and managed by intellectually challenged people. Together we organized discussions with the public of U-Turn, Quadrennial of Contemporary Art, Copenhagen, on the exhibition and on the role of art. The second work is a collaboration again with Green Pig9 and the Nam June Paik Art Center, both in Korea, and could be described, amazingly enough, as a Korean-Brechtian theater version of the famous movie *M*A*S*H*, by Robert Altman.

VH: Isn't there a particular contradiction in trying to present a performance by way of objects? Is it a compromise? Why not simply perform them?

DG: Yes, it is. And then not, because those performances are "site and time specific", and cannot be replayed: therefore they can only exist as documentation, or "cards from the other side".

VH: Your works are fragile in that they often exist only in their possibility. This is due to their form, often performative, oral and non-permanent, but also in your interest in transmission (and its ruptures) and your resistance to things institutionalized. From this, your work attests to a certain resistance and criticism to images and their dictatorship, or their link to power: "my thoughts had been replaced by moving images". What is your relationship to images?

DG: I just strongly believe that the absence of image is more powerful than any image. You can link this to a lot of things, from the Old Testament via Pasolini's *Il Vangelo Secondo Matteo*, to Michael Asher.

VH: Giorgio Agamben declared in a lecture on International Situationism and Video work: "One cannot consider the artist's work uniquely in terms of creation; on the contrary, at the heart of every creative act there is an act of de-creation. Deleuze once said of cinema that every act of creation is also an act of resistance. What does it mean to resist? Above all it means de-creating what exists, de-creating the real, being stronger than the fact in front of you. Every act of creation is also an act of thought, and an act of thought is a creative act, because it is defined above all by its capacity to de-create the real." This quote seems particularly relevant to your work, as a task of deconstruction. Your works are parasites, they pirate the institutionalised and reveal cracks in systems (cf *The Sphinx* and *One minute silence*), especially systems of monstration in contemporary art, and their inherent class hierarchies and structures of exclusion (cf *Perplexity*, 1996, *The Locked Room*, 2002-2003, *Letters to other planets* and *Visiteurs et résidents* (2005)). Is this exhibition operating on the same level?

DG: It is a natural continuation I think. I like to think of "audience" as the most revealing equivalent for "public space". Public space is better defined by what it excludes than by what it includes, since on paper everyone can come in. So on paper everyone can be part of the audience too, but the truth is that between author and audience there is an extremely complex feedback system that shapes both author and audience until they are virtually identical to each other. So this exhibition is about that.

1. **The Beggar's Opera** was Dora Garcia's contribution to the Sculpture Project Münster 07. Inspired by a play by John Gay and Bertolt Brecht, García hired three comedians to play a beggar in the streets throughout the duration of the exhibition. The work is described as follows: "To create a character who inhabits public space and who deals with it in a half improvised, half scripted way. A character marginal enough to be able to talk to everybody, to say whatever he pleases, and be there without really being noticed – like servants and madmen. He functions as a catalyst: he distributes information, and he provokes events that create a narrative, in the form of a conversation or an action. It was only logical to use the figure of the beggar. The Beggar's Opera, the 18th century opera by John Gay adapted by Bertolt

Brecht under the title *The Threepenny Opera*, is the model we adapt and adopt, as a homage and as a leading thread, to create the character of *The Beggar*. *The Beggar* is *Filch*, the apprentice beggar in both Gay's and Brecht's plays. It goes without saying that reference to such works underlines the parallels between beggar/ poet/ actor/ player/ critic." See www.thebeggarsopera.org

2. **The Sphinx, 2004:** A woman visits the exhibition every day with the aim of finding a visitor who is able to answer three questions. The answers are correct only if they match the answers decided upon by the artist.

Letters to Other Planets, 2005: The exhibition press release is translated into twelve different languages, virtually incomprehensible to all visitors to the exhibition, since they are minority languages.

The Messenger. Inserts in Real time, 2002: an actress, who plays the role of the messenger, learns a message by heart, which consists of a few sentences in a language she does not recognize or understand. The performance consists of finding, in the city or in the area where it is staged, someone who understands the message.

3. The work is as much a stage as a performance conducted by a set of precise rules about self-perception and group dynamics. Dan Graham wrote "Through the use of a mirror the audience is able to instantaneously perceive itself as a public body (as a unity), offsetting its definition by the performer. This gives it a power within the performance equivalent to that of the performer."

4. Lenny Bruce (1925 –1966) was a seminal American stand-up comedian. He broke tradition with every comedy convention. On stage, Bruce attacked religion, police, and all kind of conventions. Bruce was tried several times on obscenity charges and for drug possession. He died of a suspicious drug overdose in 1966. Andy Kaufman (1949-1984) performed in the inaugural broadcast of *Saturday Night Live*. He is known for taking comedy and performance art to the edges of irrationality, blurring the line between spectacle and reality: he took his entire Carnegie Hall audience out for milk and cookies (hiring 35 buses to do so). He was said never to be out of character, even when he was not filming.

5. *Cosmococas* is a collaboration between Helio Oiticica and Brazilian director Neville d'Almeida, *Cosmococas* is a "program in progress", made of a series of environments, the "Block Experiments" (1 to 9), an ambitious evolving project which involves installation, projections and the audience's participation.

6. For his performance *Kunst Kick*, Chris Burden had himself kicked down a flight of stairs, two or three steps at a time, during the public opening of the Basel Art Fair in 1974,

7. A collaborative group founded in New York in 1979, it included artists such as Doug Ashford, Julie Ault, Félix González-Torres, Mundy McLaughlin, and Tim Rollins. The group's interests ranged from feminist and Marxist theory to design and popular culture. Through projects and exhibitions, it questioned issues related to democracy, discrimination and the art establishment, often involving the audience, communities and collaborations with other artists.

8. *Glad Teater* (*Happy Theatre*) is a Danish theater company. It is the world's first professional theatre school for the mentally and physically disabled.

9. *Green Pig* is a theatre company formed in NYC 2001 by playwright *Bathsheba Doran*, dramaturg *Sadie Foster*, and director *Hansol Yoon*. Currently the company is run by *Hansol Yoon* and based in Seoul, Korea.

Vincent Honoré is an independent curator. After working for the Palais de Tokyo and the Tate Modern, he was in charge of defining and programming the activities of the David Roberts Art Foundation in London and coordinating the collection. *Dora García* was invited to show *Letters from Other Planets* and organize a performance in October 2008. Her work was acquired by the collection in 2008.

What a fucking wonderful audience is *Dora García's* second solo show at *galerie Michel Rein*.