

When the world is magnified

Discussion with Karina Smigla-Bobinski by Ida Hiršenfelder

Perhaps it would not be fair to say that the following discussion – taking place during Sonica Festival 2013 at the end of Karina Smigla-Bobinski's artistic residence at MoTA, Museum of Transitory Art in Ljubljana – is an interview. It would be far more accurate to call it a transcription of storytelling by the artist herself. Most importantly and most decisive for her artistic processes, narratives and contents, mediums and techniques, as I came to understand, is her overwhelming passion for art which is taking her to places she has never imagined, always embarrassing new experiences and manifestations of beauty, revealing paradoxes of society with artistic language with the gaze of a child and the brain of a mathematician.

Ida Hirsenfelder: *You are an artist with a long and versatile career. It is quite interesting for me, that you started using video and making video installations despite the fact that this technologies were quite unavailable in Poland in the 80s. The artists who at the time thought about video processes were mostly using film in a videastic manner. How did you start?*

Karina Smigla-Bobinski: When I was in elementary school, my father had an double 8 mm Russian film camera and he was very fascinated with making films. At that time it has really never occurred to me that one day I will be an artist working with this kind of medium. Nevertheless, this was an extremely important experience. The double 8 mm camera tape had a really peculiar characteristic. After shooting for few minutes, the tape needed to be turned around in the dark room, so images could be recorded on the flip side of the tape. So my father actually used a scarf to cover the film and flipped it. What I still find very curious is that he was not making family portraits or films of people, but taking long and quite abstract footages of cars and time passing by.



SIMULACRA interactive video installation at MoTA Museum of Transitory Art in Ljubljana / Slovenia

IH: *Do you still have the tapes? Did you ever exhibit them?*

KSB: Yes, I still have the tapes. I never exhibited them, but I might do this one day. It is not yet the right moment. And you know I also have his camera that he gave me, when I was still only painting.

IH: *Until when did you only paint?*

KSB: Until the middle of my studies in Munich actually. It was strange how I came to art. As I was little, I was mostly good in natural sciences in physics and mathematics, only when a teacher showed us a Malevich painting, something moved in me. Much later when I was already at the academy in Munich, I set myself a research about painting. I asked myself a question: What exactly is painting? Painting is colour and form. I examined both of them, but the world of colors really fascinated me. And hence I came to exploring the qualities of light and space. This discovery also brought me to light installations and to video.

IH: Are you still connected to the Polish art circles?

KSB: I am starting to establish the communication once again, now. After over ten years of living abroad in Munich, I was back to Poland, when I was invited to install an exhibition in Krakow.

IH: In the past few years, I saw a number of installations like "Morning Star", "Cone", "Ada" in the context of media art exhibitions. Before this pieces, you were maining light installations, a lot of video installations and also some intense work on theatre scenography. Are you still making theatre or are you completely dedicated to media art now?

KSB: After working in the theatre for a number of years I was doubtful whether I can still make art by myself in my studio. This mood overwhelmed me out of several reasons. The theatre piece was very important, informative, and we got to travel with it all around the world. Each time the performance would stop, we would get an enthusiastic applause and appraisal, people saying how beautiful it was. But when the piece is made, after the first premier and a few reprisals, you yourself as an artist do not have to do anything creative anymore. You start to enjoy the applause and start to feel far too comfortable with rewarding situation. This triggered an alarm in me. I thought, I have to keep my focus on the work and specifically on the work alone. At the certain point in 2008, I decided to quit the theatre collaboration in order to develop my own artistic language. Soon after, I was invited to make an installation in Olympiapark in Munich which I called "Island", an light installation in public space. This park was built on the ruins from the second world war. When the debris of the war was cleaned from the city, they piled it at its edge forming artificial hills which had concealed all the horror with neet and artificial slopes.

IH: Like a repressed traumatic memory.

KSB: I was wondering what would have happened if I was to cut this hill at its foot, place it on the water and make water reflect what is hidden inside. I installed hill-like shaped islands in the middle of a large pond seemingly floating on the water. I covered them with grass and they looked very natural to a casual observer. No one had thought that this was an art piece during the day, but during the night one could see a reflection of sleeping naked woman in the water. For the piece, I only used a large diapositiva on each of the islands and plexi glass that was placed at the bottom of this floating islands. This was not a projection on the water, because this is physically not possible. It was a reflection and thus gave an optical illusion that the women are deep in the water.

IH: Conceptually it also makes a lot of sense to reflect the historical memory and not to project it.

KSB: Yes but also the idea of video itself. In any of my installations video was never just use as a moving image. When the body of a dancer or the surface of the water was moving, I would rather use a still frame than a moving image. In the case of "Islands" I only used a single dia image and then let the water became a generator of movement and produce the other 23 frames. The water made the sleeping body look like it was breathing.

IH: Very often, you would also address hidden political or social agenda in your work, at the same time your installations came off as very formally clean, also monumental in a way. You also often work with large scale. What reasons are behind your decision to produce monumental and formal and seemingly formalistic works, and how does this correspond the social questions that you are addressing. In "Ada" you also used scientific and neurological explanations...

KSB: This all depends on what I want to communicate to the people. I search for form, which is very present, which the people can comprehend, feel immediately and I think there is a better way to communicate. I believe, when you have a very strong emotion, you need to have something very subtle to mediate it. Or even better, you cannot say anything about the light without the shadow. In the aesthetic sense this comes out as something clean. That is how I work with the installations. Another example would be mysticism. I know that in our society there is a lot of interest in getting in contact with spirituality, but a lot of people make a huge mistake, when they are over-emphasising it and they start to be esoteric, they fail to recognise the importance of the material world. ... I like to speak about polarities.

IH: Another very intriguing layer of our work is your approach to new technologies. You often produce a piece, which would not be possible without computers and laboratories, but you do not directly use computers. In fact, you even cal "Ada" an analogue interactive installation. You used a similar principle in "Morning Star" in which you built a rhizomatic structure with arrows. There was no new technologies only new vision of the physical.

KSB: I want to address people's fear about the digital. I dislike the paranoid approach to the digital world that suggest that it takes our reality away from us and that we become less alive when using them and somehow become lost in the virtual space. Come on! A century ago with film and photography a lot of people were saying that that will be the end of painting, the end of culture. Why are we afraid of new technologies? The question is not technology in itself, the problem is how we use it. One thing is for sure, it is very wrong to be afraid of it. I wanted to take the fear out of the people and to prove that understanding the digital is simply exploring my understanding of the world.

IH: *It is interesting how a lot of artists were working with virtual reality at the beginning of 2000, but now no one talks about virtual reality and real reality because we constantly live it, it is not something separated anymore.*

KSB: The idea of fractals by Benoit Mandelbrot was first a mathematical question. If we can make a shape, can it be endless? Yes. It is not such a complex procedure. You have a line, you cut it in half the middle, you cut it again in half and again and again and this story never ends. You get deeper and deeper. It seems absurd, but it is the beginning of the virtual. You may only imagine this shape existing in our head, it does not happen in the physical reality, but it tells everything about the way we see the world now.

IH: *It is interesting how through the history of art and also through your own artistic history we came from abstract art to infinite art. Virtuality basically is the possibility to think in the infinitum in the same sense we may thinking of the universe as an endless expansion until we cannot think about it anymore, but it still continues. It is really interesting how you play with this notion of virtuality in your latest interactive video installation "Simulacra". You place a body into a compressed space where the body itself cease to exist. You find a lot of times a very technical solution, yet it is crucial for the content of the work.*

KSB: For me the technical solutions are never only formal. You have to understand, when I was a small child, everything for me was living, the chair, the stairs, my puppet. They were not dead. When I started to use mechanical and technical objects in my work, I approached it in the same way as a living matter. That is why it was so important for me to learn about the research of Masakazu Aono, the creator of the first nano-switch, and Argentine neurologist Dante Chialvo who showed that in the nanoscale it does not matter if something seems to be living or something seems to be not living. When I use technical things, I like to use them in a very clear way. I need to use a simple language, because I am talking about a complex world. If I was to use very complex language for complex things we would get lost very quickly in this problem. I use a visual language that people can instinctively work with and they should also feel touched. And I try to prevent that people become afraid of technology.

IH: *In "Simulacra" the effect of the polarised screen was very magical or as you say, I felt touched and emotionally addressed by it. Prior to looking through the magnifying glass with the polarised screen I never thought about the physical characteristics of an LCD screen or that only this polarised screen enables the picture to be visible. The stark white empty surface of the LCD without the polarised screen and the image that was visible only through the lense was a new discovery for me and I'm always thrilled to learn something new, but in a sense it was much more important for me, what it actually made me see once I got over the pure fascination. The person in the cube in the video seemed to be in a very claustrophobic place, a very enclosed space, like it would be reaching out of the box and wanting to become physical. In this sense it was very emotional to see this digital person, trapped in the digital world wanting to get out. What this piece also tells me is that the observer finds oneself in an opposite position. We want to become digital and limitless. I see a lot of people who willingly post their intimate stories online through social networks. I think this may be very beautiful not just an act of an exhibitionist. We are trapped in the physical space and we love to be online, on a smartphone, clicking through something far less limited than our physical existence. We love to be in the digital space, it does not just trap us like some technophobes might propose.*

KSB: The way I try to do my art is to mediate it directly, so that the public does not need knowledge, does not need to read a long text in order to understand what is happening there. I believe art does not need to be only for intellectuals, but for everybody. I want them to feel immediately addressed. But then it depends on the person viewing, what they are thinking about, what they have read or know or how interested they are to find out. I do not want to push people, so they decide on their own how far and how deep they want to explore what is in front of them. But I do think of all this layers, so I make the installation in the way that it allows for discovery of deeper layers of meanings. One of the key ideas behind "Simulacra" was also the fact that today lot of creativity or fantasy happens on the surface. In this way, connected to the screen, we are already in the matrix. What I wanted to do is to cut this illusion away ... like a Red Pill from „Matrix“. Saying, no, that what reaches your eyes, what you see are only different optical light pulses. The process is happening in your brains, it is organic, analogue mental cinema. The claustrophobic figure trapped inside the screen in "Simulacra" is telling us a story of how it already exists in our heads. Hitchcock, one of the best filmmaker worked on this notion of virtuality, showing a shadow, so that the viewer would produce the story and the fear in one's head. The biggest fear comes from the unknown, from something that has not been lived through yet. You cannot show the feared, you have to stimulate people to produce the fear by themselves ... mental cinema. What I did it I removed the fantasy from the surface and placed into the minds. Virtual is what happens in the people's heads.

* Ida Hiršfenfelder [1977] is a Ljubljana, Slovenia based media art critic, curator for media art, and theorist who studied Sinology, and for a time, lived and studied in Beijing. Since 2014 she is a collaborator of MG+MSUM Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova for Network Museum online aggregator of contemporary art archives and Glossary of Common Knowledge project of L'Internationale European Project. She mostly writes on art and often conduct round-tables and public discussions. She works in the field of art curating since 2002 and in the field of art critique since 2006. From 2007 to 2013 she was a digital archivist for DIVA Station, Digital Video Art Archive at SCCA, Centre for Contemporary Arts-Ljubljana, a member of GAMA, Gateway to Archives of Media Art European network. Archives and their disappearance – the digital life and the digital afterlife – are one of her interests, which resulted in a number of lectures dealing with media archeology and the history of Internet.