

***On transformance or about art with no compromises*** – a conversation with Amela Frankl

We are talking with multimedia artist Amela Frankl about her project of several years called *What I Bear*, produced from Zagreb to Paris and back again, from its first production *Ethic of a Hero*, on April 29, 2011, to the last one, *Empathy and Art*, presented on January 24, 2013. One ought, by way of introduction, to refer to the idea of the project, into which the artist included fourteen curators, curatorial cooperatives and activists of the Zagreb arts' scene, asking them to set her a task, a commission. In the context of the project, ten commissions were completed. Each one was envisaged as the basis for the construction of a situation that afforded artists and collaborators on the project the possibility of creative testing out, cooperation, exchange and ultimately resulted in a new work, which in the form of micro-event, exhibition or presentation was shown in the Museum of Contemporary Art's Extension in Zagreb. The project was produced in association with the experimental and research department of the Museum of Contemporary Art, headed by curator Tihomir Milovac.

SUZANA MARJANIĆ: In view of the theme of this issue of *Život Umjetnosti* [Life of Art], which deals with the marginality of the art of performance, of the performative, we'll keep this conversation about your project *What I Bear*, which you produced during 2011 and 2012, with its final commission from Kontejner, a curatorial team, shown on January 24 this year, to this aspect of the project through which you forged links between the culture and arts scenes of Zagreb and Paris. Perhaps then we can start off from commission #5, which was provided by Ivana Hanaček and Vesna Vuković from the association known as BLOK, translated as "local base for cultural refreshment", which they formulated as having you reproduce in Paris the 2001 performance *Lady Godiva* by Vlasta Delimar. What were all the problems you had to face in repeating this performance/action, and how did you manage it, considering all the heteronomies you came upon?

AMELA FRANKL: First I should mention that establishing art and culture links between Paris and Zagreb was just one of the possible options of the project. By their commissions, the clients gave the project its direction and took part in its creation. My task was how to handle the given situations that preceded the works in the Extension, which was not always explicitly visible, as in the case of the BLOK commission. For this reason there were sometimes surprises, unexpected turns, misunderstandings and complaints by the clients. This gave the project a particular quality, and I thank them all for their collaboration. I performed the BLOK request illegally. I managed to get permission from the management of La Villette Park, but the permission of the police, the only one that really mattered, that, I didn't even request, because I would never have got it, or would have had to wait too long. I shan't even mention all the mishaps with hiring a horse. I couldn't pull off the production of the commission quite in the way, technically, that BLOK required. Instead, sans horse, I stood naked for fifteen minutes in front of La Geode cinema, in one of the busiest places in Paris. The technical problems with the performance were not unexpected. France has no tradition of performance. In Croatia, artists use performance to express political criticism, which is a special feature of our arts scene. In its commission, BLOK required that in the Extension I also show, along with the video documentation of my own repeat performance, the original Vlasta Delimar version. This faced me with two problems. Firstly I was to compare two situations that in my view are incomparable. At the base of Vlasta's performance is will, while my repeat of the same performance was not performance, just fulfilment of the obligation to carry out an assignment. Secondly, BLOK tried to intervene in the actual creation, for me, the only vital possibility in the project. To recall, in terms of the rules of the project, BLOK, making the commission, had complete freedom in the definition

of the it, while I, as contractor, was completely free in the final production of the commission in the Extension. The title of BLOK's commission, "Turn your skin inside out to see if there is any blood underneath it" suggested to me that it was not only about a strict demand for the repetition of the Lady Godiva performance but also for putting to the test something that for me was not anyway in question. In every work I turn my skin inside out, to use the same term, or I go all the way and bare myself.

SUZANA MARJANIĆ: A result of this commission was the video documentation of the mentioned re-performance. In what sense do you distinguish between the video documentation of a performance and a video performance? Can this video documentation be seen as a kind of video performance? Apart from that, how could you define the said re-performance in terms of execution as a reenactment, a reconstruction, a re-playing and a re-making, all of these differentiating terms being quoted from an article of Astrid Peterle, published in *Frakcija*, no. 51/52 of 2009?

AMELA FRANKL: The repeat of the Lady Godiva performance was just the execution of a set commission, it was not a performance. As for video documentation, I can best explain this to you from an example. In the works *With them and without them* of 2009 and *To the bone* of 2010 I had already used the same method as in the *What I Bear* project, except that in the latter, the displacement was an essential element of the project. I always the process of a work with a situation that occurs in some other place, some other time. I then transform the material and experience derived, from this kind of situation that has been provoked or constructed. The ultimate work is a hybrid of the previous phase of the work. My work does not follow the logic of performance, I would sooner call it transformance, not performance. This manner of work enables reflections about the self, unlike performance, in which direct action inhibits any pure analysis of the self. For example, the agreement for an exhibition in Klovićevi dvori and packing up with Valérie Jouve her photographs for illegal transport of her works across the border, or a riding course for the BLOK commission, or long talks with mental patients of Vrapče Hospital, from which a video diary was later to derive, are for me situations without any special *mise-en-scène* that I will later, in some other time and space, transform into final works, by cutting, correcting, adding, inserting comments, manipulating even, if I think it necessary. In my work there is no unity of time and place, feeling or tension of the public as in a performance. So the video documentation of the repeat performance of Lady Godiva is just a video document there as detail of a complex unit,

SUZANA MARJANIĆ: It's interesting here that the curators in the email commission very openly stated that the said performance "should have been produced in the framework of the first Urban Festival of 2001" but they gave up on the performance because of their

failure to get permission. And so Vlasta Delimar took the riskiness of doing the performance on herself, confirming courage as an essential artistic aura, the actual Festival announcing it as a Bonus Programme.

AMELA FRANKL: The determination of curators is in the background and is not always visible, but it is really essential for the effectiveness of the curator-artist relationship and the affirmation of the work. An art work cannot tolerate compromises. As an experienced performer, Vlasta knows this full well. Yes, BLOK admits that it did not give the artist support. Here we come to one of the important points in the *What I Bear* project, about cooperation, trust, solidarity, between curator and artist, irrespective of the profile and interests of the activity. In the project *What I Bear*, BLOK was concentrated on itself and its position, and exploited the freedom that it had as client, which is an interesting human reaction.

SUZANA MARJANIĆ: Then, about commission #6, that of Evelina Turković, which you titled *Some Old Songs*, how much can the commission, or your execution of the commission, be seen as a kind of film performance. In carrying out this commission, you documented a Sunday family lunch with a new French “family”.

AMELA FRANKL: In commission #6 I recapitulated and transformed a sketch from real life which stuck in my memory. During a Sunday family lunch, all the members of my French family sang at the tops of their voice a well known birthday song apart from me. I didn't know the words of this trite song, which was the reason for my momentary feeling of alienation from the community I belonged to. For the purpose of the commission and for the audience to be able to get into the experience of my Parisian way of life I made use of the film *On connait la chanson* by French director Alain Resnais. In this musical comedy, the actors are constantly getting a rush of emotion and whole-heartedly singing out well known French hits. I totally identified myself with and then transformed myself into one of the main characters of the film, putting my own name into the English subtitle. Resnais perfectly constructed the Parisian everyday life and the dialogues of all the characters, which are amazingly, even physically, like the members of my family and there was no better manner than by film to handle Evelina's request. For the evening projection of the corrected Resnais film in the Extension I put on a cocktail party, as if at my home.

SUZANA MARJANIĆ: And two authors (one artist and one curator, both women) refused to take part. Thus in the first commission, which you entitled *Ethic of a Hero*, Ida Biard (founder and manager of the Tenants' Gallery) refused to take part in the art project, i.e. the commission. Or, as she said herself in her mail, which was included in the exhibition of your project, she had no reason to explain in particular the work of the Tenants' Gallery. I wonder

what particularly impressed you in the work of the Gallery when you studied the documentation related to the artists who were linked in this common informal exhibition strategy (Paris – Zagreb, 1972-1976).

AMELA FRANKL: Ida Biard refused to give an interview that Radmila Iva Janković had commissioned for the *What I Bear* project. I was very particularly impressed by the unaltered conviction of Ida Biard, even after more than a quarter of a century, that her concept of announcing a strike to the artists was the only proper resistance to society and the only right way to establish artistic freedom. Biard remained isolated in this conviction. Many artists who had taken part in the work of the Tenants' Gallery had in the meantime built up satisfactory individual careers. From this point of view Ida Biard is in my work a heroine who uncompromisingly defends her views and ideas. For this reason I compared her with Corneille's Horace. Unlike Ida Baird, I think that artistic freedom is not something exclusive, some sacrosanct eternal fire. I am working on my artistic liberty even now, when we are talking about this commission. The Tenants' Gallery is a project that came into being in the spirit of the events of 68, when they went out from the institutions onto the streets and criticised the capitalist system of society and art. The principle of self-organisation and the ephemerality of the actions imparted a certain flexibility and flux to the actions. This model is quite much practised even today. Personally I find it more interesting and challenging to work where there are limitations. A rule is there to be departed from, for some other solution to be found and its validity to be tested.

SUZANA MARJANIĆ: Another commission that was not fulfilled in the expected direction of the actual project was the answer of Ivana Bago, which you produced in the strategy of a performance-public-reading in front of the entry to the Extension; you read to those gathered there the mail of that curator in which she explains why she refuses to take part in the project. This commission however remained designated (as currently given on the web site of the Museum of Contemporary Art) as commission #7, with the name of the client – DeLVe (i.e., Ivana Bago). In her mail, which draws heavily on theory, Ivana Bago tests out the sense of your project, which requires a commission from a curator or a team of curators, which you, as artist, produce in Paris, setting up a kind of contact between Paris and Zagreb. In the explanation of the project, you ask if the mail of Ivana Bago is a commission or if ultimately DeLVe (Ivan Bago) is taking part in the project at all, or not.

AMELA FRANKL: I ought to say something about the rules of the project. When I contacted prospective participants, they all agreed to take part. We had a kind of oral contract. However, for example, the association *Slobodne veze* agreed, but when a year later it was their turn to send me a commission, in the spirit of the meeting and conversation, they never

got in touch. I did not insist on them collaborating, and no one had their arm twisted to do it. The “clients” were absolutely free to select the contents of the commission, which means they absolutely made an impact on the course of the project, they were its co-creators. It was up to them to decide whether to honour this contract, agreement, or not. Ivana Bago did not refuse to take part. She just refused to follow the rules of the project. And this option of hers was also acceptable and interesting to me. She analysed the project exhaustively, and proposed that instead of a commission from Paris, on the basis of her critique, I should re-examine and analyse the project *What I Bear*. Ivana left it to me to decide whether I would analyse my project, and if so, how. But as she herself mentioned, she founded her critique only and exclusively on announcements of productions published on the Museum of Contemporary Art web site and what she had heard around about the project, and this kind of critique doesn't allow for fundamental self-analysis. Here I am talking about exchange; I am ready to let my project be tested, but then I expected the curator is going to let their text and opinion be tested as well. According to the rules of the project, I couldn't decide whether her critique was a commission or not, only the client could do this. For this reason I tossed a coin and settled the uncertainty. So they audience should understand why I resorted to coin tossing and why I was in a quandary, I had to read out aloud in public her criticism of the project and our correspondence related to this mail. After the public reading and the coin tossing, chance would have it that Ivana's mail was a commission and that DeLve should remain in the project. In line with the heads-or-tails result, the name of this work remained in the end “Letter/Tails” [an untranslatable Croatian pun].

SUZANA MARJANIĆ: Can the photograph published in the Croatian edition of *Elle* (August 2011) in which with Feđa Vukić you are lying on stairs at the entrance to Extension be thought of as a kind of photo-performance of the assignment you title *Velvet Melancholy*?

AMELA FRANKL: To make it brief, Feđa wanted me to buy him in Paris a vinyl of the Velvet Underground and Nico that he had lost in the nineties. In return he gave me a photo bought, like that vinyl, in Paris in the early eighties. Apart from photographer Boris Cvjetanović, Feđa and me, there was nobody else in Extension during the handover. I built upon Feđa's very simple and personal commission during the production with the fictional dialogue and this somewhat uncommon photograph. I wanted the act of handing over the record to be recorded in the informal atmosphere of youthful leisure, flights of imagination, pop and fashion, just as Feđa subtly described it in his account of the reason for the commission. When it was published in the summer issue of *Elle*, the photo, alongside the fictional dialogue, briefly gained currency.

SUZANA MARJANIĆ: Next then, commission #4, entitled *Drummer* was produced as an encounter and meeting with Miriam Cendrars, daughter of Blaise Cendrars, and a commission from Kornel Šeper from URK, the Culture Development Association. Kornel Šeper is a fan of Cendrars' work and wanted to go with you to Brittany to get to know the daughter of the writer, and from this point of view, considering all the facts mentioned, can this journey be looked at as a kind of performative journey that resulted in Kornel's meeting a person close to Cendrars? And you were accompanied on the trip by Žarko Vijatović, who photographed the meeting.

AMELA FRANKL: Oh yes, for me the trip to and three day stay in Brittany were much more important to the project and the final work than just the meeting with Miriam Cendrars. It was interesting how each one of this adjusted and accommodated to this situation. Žarko follow us photographically, but his presence for me had an extra quality, solidarity with the project. I particularly remember the taking of the landscape for the Extension, at Žarko's initiative, and discovering the dead gull on the rock. Of course, it was a Gorgona motif. Kornel managed to persuade us on the trip to Brittany that it was logical to visit Blaise's grave, which we did. While we were walking along the shore, without a word he went off and disappeared, and in the conversation with Miriam Cendrars put his questions very energetically. At the end the situation of adjustment and accommodation became the main subject of the work. The final production in Extension consisted of a short travelogue, photos with Miriam, several of Žarko Vijatović's video landscapes and the disturbing sounds of the drums.

SUZANA MARJANIĆ: Can commission #8, *Potential of Space*, which was conceived by Irena Bekić, from suggestions by Georges Perec in his book *Kinds of Space*, which he offered to his readers as a kind of exercise, be seen too by the definition of the marginality of the performative?

AMELA FRANKL: During work on the fulfilment of Irena's commission, what became particularly essential for me was the fact in Perec's autobiography, one that defined and coloured the whole of his literary work, the experience of the loss of his parents. From this point of view I understood the exercise of observing and classifying space and determining its qualities as a motif of the search for one's own determination and the consequence of the loss of parents. I transferred Perec's search to Zagreb, and ended it there. The final work was the proposal to my mother that she should adopt Georges Perec. I wanted my parents to become his, I wanted to give him his place. The fulfilment of his commission perhaps best illustrates the manner of work I spoke of at the beginning, the procedure of the transformation of a situation or – to keep to the logic of the theme – the transformance. I

spoke for a long time, very intimately, with my mother about her adoption of Georges Perec, and the photo assemblage exhibited in *Extension*, an artefact of the previous phase of the work, consisted on the one hand of a series of photographs from Paris crossings and on the other of large portraits of my mother, my father, and Georges Perec, arranged like family photographs.

SUZANA MARJANIĆ: Did the text from *Boomerang* about oxytocin inspired by the Kontejner curatorial team for the final commission, # 10, named Empathy and Art, produced in collaboration with Jens Hauser, which is also of a performative character since you together with Tihomir Milovac, as curator of the project, and Sunčica Ostoić, as one of the clients, present to the audience the way of using the equipment Model: 00.

AMELA FRANKL: No, Kontejner – Bureau of Contemporary Art Practice commissioned me only to work with Jens Hauser. Only when I had already decided to work on the subject of empathy did I discover the hormone oxytocin and informed Jens and Kontejner about it. I published the idea about a work on empathy and oxytocin in *Boomerang* just like other ideas that I still haven't put into practice but intended to produce in the future. Just to recall, the publication of these ideas for future works in *Boomerang* was my potlatch for all those whom I sent the on-line bulletin *Boomerang*, created for commission # 9 – *Potlatch or Utopia of Artistic Exchange*, commissioned by Tanja Vrvilo. In fact I worked the longest on the Kontejner commission, and still am working on it in another form in the ODE association – a not-for-profit art association for unselfish and uncontrolled promotion of social empathy, *Oxytocin to Empathy*, abbreviated ODE, as form of my new legal entity. Kontejner actively monitored the commission of its order for a year, helped me and advised me in all phases of the work. Olga Majcen Linn and Sunčica Ostojić, Kontejner curators, supported me in the foundation of the ODE association. Collaboration with Kontejner and Jens Hauser is still underway and will be finally fulfilled when I bring him concrete works, which I also regularly inform him about. One of these works, apart from the foundation of the association, is an action for donating equipment for an empathic approach to a work of art to the research and experimental department of Museum of Contemporary Art. And it was also the closing event with which I marked the end of the project *What I Bear*.

SUZANA MARJANIĆ: Since in this talk the questions have been thematically oriented and so not all commissions can be covered, can you in closing pick out some other project commissions that in their production referred to the marginality of the art of performance, so that we can satisfy the commission of this thematic issue of *Život Umjetnosti*?



AMELA FRANKL: Perhaps I might announce the book of the *What I Bear* project as a commission to myself. It will be a hybrid book-cum-catalogue, a transformation of the material of the two-years' work on the project, and will certainly be something "marginal".

Amela Frankl and Suzana Marjanić in conversation, December 2012