

What did Amela bear?

It would be a little bit too assuming of me to say that it was completely clear to me what artist Amela Frankl was going to do in the project she brought to me in the autumn of 2010, which she had already given the title *What I Bear*.¹ But it was a bit of a challenge, agreeing to take part in the process that was to follow. The idea of this artist was to set up links between Zagreb and Paris, the two cities in which she lived in parallel. This primarily referred to the connection between two artistic and cultural milieux, her role, the way she defined it, being supposed to be that of agent or mediator, and the real protagonists of the project were people in the Zagreb arts and culture work, artists, social and artistic activists, whom the artist selected herself. In consequence, then, another important actor was Paris, with its culture scene. The project, it was to be seen at the end, was the complex relationship between private and public, the artist putting her private connection with Paris and France to public use. She set herself up, as mediator, being there to serve for the achievement of a particular task (a commission) with cultural contents. But not without certain conditions. The stance of the artist was that she did not want to arbitrate or evaluate the commission through her own ideological, social dimension, through its practicability or ethics. She took up a very clear stance to the role of mediator, someone to work as agent, someone to be at someone else's service and who, as she emphasised "would have the opportunity to affirm her own freedom, but also to put her creative capacities to the test, and, while respecting the set rules, to meet the unexpected instructions of the "client" and offer unexpected solutions and overcome the constraints within the project".

On the Zagreb side there were the commissions of the following artists and curators: Radmila Iva Janković, Marina Viculin, Feđa Vukić, Kornel Šeper /URK,BLOK/Vesna Vuković and Ivana Hanaček, Evelina Turković, Irena Bekić, DelVe, Tanja Vrvilo (Filmic mutations), Kontejner/bureau of art practice. For a period of 21 months, from April 2011 to January 2013, the artist fulfilled 10 commissions that all meant preparations for and actually staying in Paris, then the accomplishment of the task and at the end on return to Zagreb the presentation of the results; using facts and documentation collected while in Paris, she created new expressive units. We decided that this would be an ongoing presentation (provisionally speaking, an exhibition), that is, work in progress, and we put all the events in the non-gallery space of the MCA, in the Extension, a small separate part of the Museum lobby. This was to turn out a good decision, for this non-gallery space, being not overwhelmed by gallery and exhibition stereotypes, was an excellent setting for a project like this, so heterogeneous in media and content. The presentation formats depended on the kinds of assignment and on the results obtained in the communication process.²

¹Vrlo važno naglasiti je da to nije upitna rečenica, jer umjetnica izostavlja znak upita na kraju, već je to konstatacija, višeznačna sintagma, enigmatična poruka koju je tek trebalo složiti i ponuditi na odgonetanje.

² For the more precise execution of the assignment, Amela founded an association called ODE (through oxytocin to empathy) and launched the blog "Read Boomerang!". Also as part of this publication, translations are published of four French philosophical texts, important for the understanding and the very effect of "What I

And what was the format of the commissions, and how were they understood, and what was the role of the artist? In terms of kinds of commission, there were some rather simple, that only asked her to be a courier or post-woman. Then there were those that sought special conditions of performance in Paris and additional artistic engagement and those that required of the artist some form of research or discovery practice ranging from the finding of persons to scientific facts. And in terms of type of relationship between client and artist, there were commissions that by the nature of their profile would often push the artist to the edge of impossibility, to a space very close to her personality, to her own self the way she perceives herself. And the artists wanted to avoid this at all costs. This didn't always work out, and so inevitably tensions were created and dynamic relationships with clients developed, as with the themes of the commissions; a kind of microcosm was formed around the participants, among whom we should certainly include the small but loyal audience that from the very beginning was actively involved in keeping up with the project.

And so the initial idea of culture commissions was turned into unplanned analyses and diagnoses of society and social relations. Although drawing on a small and very isolated part of artistic communities in Zagreb and Paris, the doors were open to global issues. These are above all issues about the low level of readiness to cooperate and share sovereignty, about the wide diffusion of mistrust and lack of empathy.

It was very worthwhile finding out something about the differences in the understanding of the space of art and its active field, the differences in the perception of the role of art in social relations and the relations between those actually actively involved in the art scene. I recall that Amela invited several curators and curatorial collectives from the public, i.e., institutional, sphere, as well as from the NGO sector. They in turn as clients, according to their own choice, activated a wide field of stakeholders in culture and drew attention thereby to a string of interesting phenomena from the field of art itself and its social function (for example: radical practices of appropriation, new forms of performativeness and re-performance; authorial autonomy, original and copy, sovereignty; the ego...).

As the format of the fulfilment of the order or commission changed with respect to client and order, so the position of artist as mediator/agent sometimes turned into that of creator (at the beginning, Amela wanted to remain merely a cool contractor). Sometimes the task was unperformable unless she adjusted it to her artistic subjectivity and turned it into a form close to her (for example, the BLOK commission for her to repeat the action-cum-performance Lady Godiva by Vlasta Delimar in the Paris park of La Villette, when the artist, instead of riding naked on horseback, blocked by the Parisian administrative constraints, decided to pull off the performance by exposing herself bare in La Villette Park in front of the imposing La Géode dome). It was interesting to watch the unpredictable processes in which

Bear": Discourse on Voluntary Servitude of La Boétie, Reflections on the Jewish Question of J. P. Sartre, Coldness and Cruelty/ Presentation of Sacher-Masoch by Gilles Deleuze and Ellis Island of Georges Perec.

the client turned into subject, into the commission itself (in, for example, the commission of DelVe when the reaction of curator Ivana Bago in the form of a letter became interesting enough and a valuable enough contribution to the project for Amela to decide to treat it as the result of the commission). Or as a personal wish turned into (institutional) embarrassment for the client did not check on whether the order could at all be fulfilled and at the moment when the wish was put into practice, withdrew from any further collaboration (for example, the commission of Marina Viculin, the then director of Klovičevi dvori Gallery understood the organisation of an exhibition of the works of photographer Valérie Jouve in that venue. But because of the nature of Amela's project, the presentation of the commission was made in the form of a small show in the premises of the MCA Extension, where all the other presentations of commissions were put on. But Viculin took this, in line with institutional practices, as the loss of priority in the exhibition of a photographer very important to her). Some commissions, and this depended on the level of the private relationship, as was the case with the commission of Evelina Turković, touched on Amela's private, personal life in Paris. The artist endeavoured to shift ground here and look at her private life with other eyes, more objective than hers. She used for this the film *On connaît la chanson* of Alain Resnais with a depiction of Parisian family life in many ways similar to her own. For the presentation, Amela changed in the subtitles of the dialogue of the female the name of the leading lady to her own, into Amela (which puts her in the position of the artist's alter ego). The visitors to the show were invited to a supper that the artist put on in the very same way as the custom in her own Parisian family setting. For a moment, the audience was a simulacrum of her family, the character in the film a simulacrum of the artist's private life.

What must have been one of the most important procedures that Amela practised all through the project was actually her role-taking, most often via the appropriation of some form of behaviour. It would frequently be without any definite and recognisable model, which made it the more difficult for us to contextualise and understand, but still convincing enough to take the artist (and us too) off in the right direction. We won't claim that the artist's personality is essentially different from the roles that she took on and performed during the project, but the fact is that she was all the way through convincing, whether it was about practices of a promoter of science (Kontejner: Empathy and Art / Collaboration with Jens Hauser), or organiser and producer (Kornel Šeper, UKR: Drummer), curator (Marina Viculin: Valérie Jouve, First Time), pop fan (Feđa Vukić: Velvet Melancholy), artist (BLOG: Let's see what's underneath the skin; DelVe: Letter), activist (Tanja Vrvilo: Read Boomerang!; Radmila Iva Janković: Ethics of a Hero) or the role of alter ego (Evelina Turković: Some Old Songs), so that we can conclude that Amela's artistic personality is multidimensional and polycentric and positively unfocused, but concentrated enough after all on the goals for the artist's idea to be implemented notwithstanding the differences. In her case the objective was to re-examine the statuses of personal and social freedoms, readiness to work with others, empathy, then, as a practice essential to society. We can say then that the project indirectly tests out the status issues of our private and public lives, so

important today, primarily the issues of freedoms, conditional and natural liberty, the inroads made upon its vulnerable fabric by a series of global phenomena and ever-growing forms of limitations, among the most important, individual and collective violence and terror, or terrorism.

The philosophy of freedom that developed during modern history and that paved the way for the modern, liberal, understanding of liberty, deals with two polarised, binary oppositions of freedom, the individual as against the collective, in the classical sense, or negative as against positive freedom. By way of deviation from classical liberalism our age has given us interpretations conditioned by the context of the time when the fundamental right to individual freedom has become inverted into its own opposition, into egocentricity, intolerance and self-satisfaction. We can find the reasons in the understanding of freedom as precondition and necessity for the achievement of personal success, with this freedom being made sure of by someone else. Although not directly it was such states that were the point of departure for the artist's critical thinking, for a certain proffering of her own freedom for others' disposal and accordingly in practice testing out the space of freedom and the limits of ethicalness in the subsequent procedures. The artist opened up the questions of the survival of individual freedoms in a political as well as in a psychological sense. Her strategy for ensuring a free passage to the sought result, for she did not stand in the way of the client's achievement of their wishes, is a certain test of the ancient Hobbesian definition expressed in *Leviathan* that negative freedom, in the sense of the removal of restrictions on it constitutes "the absence of external obstacles. Such obstacles can often take away part of a man's power to do what he wants, but they can't get in the way of his using his remaining power in obedience to his judgment and reason".³ However, this artist is testing out the other option already referred to of positive liberty, which understands someone's (the state's for example) patronising or arbitrary attitude and the creation of maximalist conditions for the fulfilment of expected wishes, which, in the case of this project, means a critical testing out of the mutual readiness of client and artist to work together, willingness to reformulate or share sovereignty.

If we agree to the thesis that in fact there is no total freedom the issue that arises is whether these 'clients' stopped themselves in imagining their ideas, i.e., in the consumption of the freedom that the artist offered them, or whether they halted in this. The fact is that at the beginning the broadly imagined space of freedom was sometimes narrowed, for the real space of life simply is not entirely a space of freedom. The only thing that can be treated as a space of freedom is the idea of the artist of a relationship with the clients. Everything else is a question of research methodology, operation with cultural facts. Here I am thinking of the themes of research that the artist got as orders, and also of the results that she provided after the procedure and when the task was done. This was in fact her intention, to appropriate the facts and figures and the artistic facts as her own artistic property that she

³Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan: Or the Matter, Forme, and Power of a Commonwealth Ecclesiasticall and Civil*, Touchstone, New York, 2008.

would subsequently recycle and arrange into new facts, actually into a new artistic use of actual facts.

The closest comparison that can explain to us what kind of methodology is involved here would be a comparison with scientific research and experiments with clear protocols and predictable expectations. But these preconditions do not mean that these expectations will actually be met, irrespective of during the experiments all the participants following the agreed on instructions. And this is the interest and the challenge of just this kind of methodology, in which it is possible to have completely clear objectives, predictable and measurable procedures, and yet the results will be diametrically opposed to what was expected.

Finally it has to be said that the project *What I Bear* is on the one hand characterised by a high degree of inclusiveness, for it pulls many participants into its processes, and on the other by a manifold reflexiveness, for it reflects the emotional and intellectual states of the artist who is executing the tasks, as well as of the clients, the commissioning entities, key partners in the process. And that is why this project is an important contribution to the development of the mediating art practices and strategies with which artists have in the last few decades positioned themselves in the contents of life and art, creating accordingly the conditions for them to be still more powerfully suffused.

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