

In *Irena Lagator Pejovic: The Society of Unlimited Responsibility. Art as Social Strategy*. 2001-2011. Edited by Christa Steinle, Karin Buol-Wischenau, Neue Galerie Graz am Universalmuseum Joanneum. Published by Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Köln.

## Bazon Brock In the String Forest

Irena Lagator in Conversation with Her Rock Face Bazon Brock

Irena introduced me personally to her oeuvre. I was sitting opposite her, between us were colour reproductions of her space works: a dozen installations that are not defined but represented by the use of string walls, string curtains and string screens. The strings are real, like letters and syllables of words that are supposed to turn into phrases, into a text. In this way the threads indicate (Greek: *deixis*) a room that is occasional and conditional, particularly when a visitor or actor moves through the strings, like the wind blowing through a wheat field or a visitor walking through a doorway protected by a string curtain in southern houses.

Through movement, virtual volumes are created that are perceived on the one hand as singular entities, and on the other hand as a continuum of blended phenomena. Artists such as Duchamp, Pevsner, Tinguely and Soto were interested in such virtual volumes. Representatives of Op Art grouped around Bridget Riley even tried to establish a classification of virtual phenomena, such as the fundamental principles that have been developed for the training of artists since Johannes Itten's efforts for the Bauhaus school. In this context, classification primarily refers to the development of continuity and analogies. It is exactly these analogies that apparently irritate Irena. This is the reason why she inspired me to respond to her adventurous inspiration that there are not merely metaphorical associations but also other relations between the material she uses for her work – the strings – and the string theory of physicists and mathematicians.

My response seemed rather distorting like any reaction or a carnival mirror. In Irena's spaces, however, it is not a real space that is reflected, but a reflex, indeed a reflection. And reflection means both mirror image and echo. This corresponds to the non-identity of space that is defined on the one hand as a building in material and physical terms; and on the other hand, of architecture, as the opening of an action or lived space (after H. Lefebvre).

Irena's constructions are to be understood as a unification of both levels: the construction and architecture of material design, and the expression of vitality. This would imply that in architecture it is indeed possible to walk through walls and to mobilise, reconstruct and deconstruct a building, just as children do when they play with toy building bricks. Stage design is an historical example of the penetration of mobilised material and

dematerialised architecture as a conceptual movement, as an expression of vitality, as perceptions being narrated or perceptions that inevitably accompany all tales.

Physicists' strings can be compared to stage design belonging to the imaginative world of scientists when they evoke subatomic events, like mentalists who summon ghosts. The string concept stresses the threading of subatomic entities and the constant shift between the relations created by threading. Clearly, the situation is different when we deal with the strings that Irena uses, and it is already at this point that the reference of string spaces made to the string world ends. What we are left with is a poetic incentive that we also feel when we are presented with the concept of a "black hole", which we relate on the one hand to astrophysicists' concept of the world and on the other to the psychology of weakness, whereby one is likely to fall into a black hole. For instance, Joseph Beuys' installation at *Kunsthalle Düsseldorf* presented the black hole as a wall opening covered with soot.

Such conceptual poetry corresponds to Bachelard's "Poetics of Space" that explicitly deals with the analogies between the conceptual worlds of artists and scientists respectively without removing unbridgeable differences. Artists and scientists alike are, of course, (just like Irena's visitors) dependent on the very same neurophysiological world apparatus that is commonly referred to as the brain. If we are, however, by nature all equal with regard to this instrument and in terms of references we make to the world, how is it possible to arrive at such different judgements about the construct that we call world, which Irena refers to as "understanding through thought, experience and senses"? By the same token, human beings do not have a common basis if we assume that we all have different world apparatuses, namely brains. The answer given by brain researchers is that our brain has reached its marvellous efficiency primarily as a result of its ability to adapt its natural neurophysiology to the obstacles posed by the environment, in other words by learning. This is referred to as brain plasticity.

Like all artists Irena, therefore, poses herself the question: Can we create a challenging environment as a work of art in a way that makes us curious about how the brain reacts to challenges that have so far been entirely unknown? She also asks herself whether a work of art can be regarded as an "equilibrium" in relation to other definitions of the environment developed by our brains. The answer is yes because the neurophysiological, biochemical and bioelectrical instruments, which help the brain to cope with challenges, are the same for both a work of art and a more conventional environment. The difference lies between conventionally familiar, redundant environments, and the unknown, that is, new challenges that are posed through a work of art or a work of science.

Why are all efficient brains so neophile and geared to everything that is novel? On the one hand, because everything that is new is a potential danger that one attempts to fend off through destruction or to put into perspective through defiance; on the other hand because the new can only be perceived and judged in terms of the old. As long as the new is really new, it does not have any purpose, content or dimension. The new only obtains these characteristics once, under pressure by the new, reference is made back to the old, the sensational discovery being that the old is largely modified when put under

pressure by the new. This is the reason why our neophilia offers the most intelligent strategy for constantly rethinking what we consider to be self-evident with reference to the world, and what we take for granted in terms of our relation to the world, in order not to lose, amidst established conventions, the ability to adapt to new conditions.

## Open Art Work

Time and again, Irena refers to “open” art work (that is “art work as an open and not as a closed or static entity”). This may sound suspiciously like stylish bric-a-brac. However, we can show that it is exactly the contrary that counts for Irena. In the art scene, concepts such as “open art work”, “nonlinearity”, “dematerialisation”, “plural authorship” and similar ideas are thrown into the stream of communication, similar to the way a fisherman casts his bait into the water. One hundred years ago this might have led to surprising results, but in the meantime has been shown to be arbitrariness, through which one is convinced to be able to counter societal or other constraints. However, one does not avoid the unacceptable demand of having to produce a self-contained oeuvre by stating the intention to create one that is open.

Every creative endeavour, including art, handicrafts and even cake and pastry making, is committed to a logic of work that provides the precise distinction between work and non-work. Non-work cannot be work; therefore an open art work is also not work. What is rather meant here is that an experimental arrangement renders various results, which is to be expected; or that open art work as non-work is an accumulation of thematically oriented quotations or a creation of clusters, which, like any other cluster, follows a structural principle. Freud admittedly claimed that a toddler has to learn to recognise the heap of excrement he produces as his very own achievement or his own “work”. Yet what is referred to here is the effort made during excretion and not a result according to the structural principle of cluster formation.

Besides, the English concept “work in progress” aims incidentally at the continuity of the work done and not at the result of the work, and much less as an art work; because in English nobody refers to an “art work in progress”. Something similar holds true for an assertion about the nonlinearity of a depiction or narrative style, which everyone quotes these days as a justification for his inability to develop a story.

An author’s “death” is proclaimed by those people who intend, with this statement, to show off their own names to their best advantage. Plural authorship is either a matter of course or nonsense. When someone says that it is not only the author of a statement, but also the addressee, who contributed to the unfolding of a context, it is clearly a truism to which, however, the highest importance is attributed as soon as we discover that speaking and listening, showing and looking, in short, that communication challenges all participants to walk a tightrope.

What we refer to as understanding is only a productive way of misunderstanding – productive because it leads all participants beyond that which they are capable of having

ever intended to say or believed to hear.

For the simultaneity of the non-simultaneous that has been called for with pathos time and again, there are ineluctable standards, such as in archaeology. Archaeologists succeed in achieving access to a territory, that is, on a solid segment of ground, on the very same spot, through deep-level excavations, the timely structure of historical sequences. As soon as this historical succession of events has been reconstructed in the very same territory, “simultaneity” does by no means facilitate an arbitrary handling of the various layers of history as a stratified event. Rather, the orientation towards a place in the world that is always the same enforces precisely the construct of a “historical sequence”, which can in no way be conceived randomly.

Emotionalists of nonlinearity willingly overlook the well-established point of reference, namely always the same location, where historical events took place in succession and not simultaneously. To be historical calls for an order in time, that is, a true succession, not a random succession.

All these supposedly significant concepts such as “open art work”, “nonlinearity” or “author’s death” cannot be understood in all their particulars as an opposition to the demand for a successful completion of the logic of work between beginning and end (referred to as dramaturgy), but as being complementary. They are, therefore, not real entities, but thought necessities, that is, inevitable manifestations of a thought process. The Greeks referred to this as *chresmodein*, which is the linguistic depiction of a punch line in storytelling or of a conclusion to a thought process. In other words, a reference to thought necessities.

If everything is random, it is possible to demand responsibility only with reference to very close connections. The entrepreneurial handling as an open access to any material is therefore often designated as a “society of limited responsibility”. If, however, under fully developed thought necessities, the seeming arbitrariness is reversed into its opposite – that is, if precisely the work concepts are kept open – then also responsibility has to be extended to unlimited responsibility.

Irena’s projects operate precisely under this name – projects and concepts respectively in relation to an open oeuvre, which during the work process is to be understood as a mere complementary element of the completed work (the finishing line, keystone or “end of a story” are classically marked with the indication “The End”). Yet this means for the observer, spectator and listener to her works that by The End is implied the beginning of the impact on the recipient.

Unlimited responsibility corresponds to the idea of unconditional surrender. Unconditionality and unrestrictedness challenge each other, for instance, in relation to what a filmgoer experiences while indulging unconditionally in the effect of a film. With this possibility rests the strategy of overpowering as it was developed by Wagner and, in succession, by Hollywood. Unconditional commitment is also praised in popular love poetry and in the way various theologies make the point that to truly believe and love

means to devote oneself unconditionally.

High art, as people say, is art that overwhelms everyone. Yet at the same time, this implies, according to Irena's conception, that art is characterised by unlimited responsibility. This is a remarkable progress compared to the previous distinction made between the aesthetic and socio-political spheres. No one can acquit himself any more by claiming that he is only the mastermind behind the scenes. And this means that the impact that is intended by the creator of the work needs to be added unconditionally to the conception of work as its complement.

I suppose that the assertion about unlimited responsibility stems from the experience of authors in totalitarian regimes – regimes of religious, economic, ideological or ecological fundamentalism. Is this meant to be criticism or a postulate? Both simultaneously, Irena responds, referring to the reason for this differentiation that is entered in the land registry as a territory with historical connotations, people's living space. She speaks of "cognitional surrender", the commitment to thought necessities, and of "unlimited responsibilities" in the sense of fulfilling the never-ending obligation to respond.

Echoes are such indispensable responses and I, as Irena's echo, have agreed to be engaged with this piece of writing in an endless continuation of a question-answer game. "Duty" in the sense of "due to" – this is exactly what is meant by the inscription "ICH DIEN" (*I serve*) on the Prince of Wales's symbol of three feathers. And I am a thinker on duty. Irena's work offers me the opportunity to prove myself as a commissioner. Whether I succeed, Irena, please give me an answer!