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The Space of Habitable

In the last third of the 20th century, drawing on practices of pre-war avant-garde movements, there was a renewed interest in the exploration of art objects as “spatial constructions,” intentionally incomplete categories or objects of new kinesthetic perceptions in the observer’s consciousness.

Diverse and specific energies of initiation that artworks set in motion – from neo-kinetic and op art via minimal and land art, to a number of minimalist spatial interventions of conceptual art – take place in a given space as *continual processes* that aim to transform the space and prevent the possibility of *petrification*, however we define it. The artists’ motivation for undertaking the most varied “spatial explorations” was essentially and almost invariably based on the understanding that the media’s global penetration of public space and political contamination of daily life had reached such an extreme paroxysm in regard to the optimum human habitat that it required a thorough re-examination of perception of the changed formal possibilities and a revisit of the experience of direct habitation of physical space.

Irena Lagator’s spatial constructions mediate the *conception* of new and subtle formative experiences, aiming at an idealized, utopian union of art and life or at humanizing the space for artistic play, drawing from the principles of neo-constructivist and minimal art. Although these movements are structurally different, the artists’ spatial explorations were directly inspired by the vitalist theories of natural sciences and phenomenology of the second half of the 20th century. Redefining the understanding of space beyond the categories of rational comprehension of the world or an ideal exterior that denaturalizes the phenomenon of time, these researchers argued for an understanding of space as an imperceptible but essential element of all our carnal and imaginary experiences that repeatedly reconfigure our being in and experiencing the world. Conceptually, the spatial explorations of Irena Lagator are closest to various borderline procedures within the Euro-American minimal and conceptual art scene, including artists such as Robert Irwin, Fred Sandback, Dan Flavin and Daniel Buren. For these artists, the “imaginary” potential of the architectural semantics of public space is the departing point for redefining space in its aesthetic and intellectual dimension of “the experience of the place”, rather than a

project of radical transformation of its social context.

Always configured in discreet and minute deviations from the conventional optical perspective, coordinate points or prescribed habits of movement in public space, Irena Lagator's explorations deal with the phenomenology of synchronic experiences of passage and inhabitation and places of hypothetical initiation of the subject. With spatial installations such as *What is Missing* (2005), *Please Wait Here* (2005), *Living Room, Own Space* (2006) and *Living Space* (2007), the artist profiled a whole series of structurally similar pieces that make up a careful visual and tactile arrangement of total spatial experience. Constructed of densely grouped cotton threads hanging freely from the ceiling, all these installations simultaneously outline the scope of "an ideal habitat" *sui generis* and a structure of soft spatial corridors that sensitize the conventional rituals of movement and habitation. Participants literally pass through this space, *inhabiting the time* of one's own relocation from one point to another, undergoing a hypothetical transformation from one "state of mind" to another, thus bringing the physical experience of movement into direct contact with psychological experience of duration and individual time.

Taking the dominant longitudinal axis of the participants' walk as a point of departure, these installations also reveal the isolated morphological structure of a "spatial image in the process of formation" that manifests the idea of infinite thresholds. The idea of a threshold, or *infinite thresholds* of the gaze as a space of hypothetical initiation directed by uniform perspective, is borrowed from the basic semantics of architecture and painting. The pieces by Lagator that preceded these, defined as "interventions in space", had already consistently exploited semantics of threshold by introducing architectural elements: openings, doors and, especially, windows as places of passage and exclusive "visual borders" that continually introduce outer space into the inner space of habitation and then open this space outward toward the landscape. In pieces like *Witness of Time* (2001-02), *Witness of Time – Now* (2002), *Passerby!* (2004), and, to a certain extent in *BBBeauty* (2003) and the videos *May I Help You?* and *Registrar* (2004) the artist introduces these elements to demarcate the borders of passage, possible sites of communication or thresholds of virtual initiation of the subject within the framework of directed planes of public space. These pieces could be seen as signifiers of a sort, as geo-political border markers or, as in the more elaborate spatial installations of the later period, paradigms for different interpretations of the quality of present time that originate from this unique collision of the individual working of time (free movement of the viewer?) and the time of perception directed within the space of habit, history and present-day social exchange.

The pieces, *Is It Still Winter, Outside? – The Way We Live – How Small Is the Universe*, specially constructed for busy platforms of a former railway station that is now a gallery of the Banja Luka Museum of Contemporary Art, are structurally very different spatial interventions. Each, in its own way, has the effect of re-creating the environment and the time of hypothetical initiation of the subject.

The spatial installation *Is It Still Winter, Outside?*, comes closest to the type of previous work in its creation of the “ideal habitat-passage”. A reframing of “space outside” and “other time” into a continuum of the inner “here” and “now”, as is done by *In the landscape of Spring in the Middle of Winter/White Museum Space*, was undertaken, according to the artist, with the intention “to annul the limits of space found in museums where art is exhibited, exceeding them and expanding them towards the real, towards the only reality, that is, the creative subject ...”. The vertical corridors of thin cotton threads, placed along a de-centered axis, are once again left to hang freely from the ceiling, arranged in degrees of color that range from dark to light-green. The volume of space is filled by their density, in this instance leaving only part of the narrow entrance open to the visitor’s view. The axiomatic planes of existing space and their conventional tectonic are de-spaced by relocation of uninterrupted thresholds of imaginary green alleyways (*allées vertes*) that nullify the notion of borders and create the effect of a distant horizon. Parallel to this optic dematerialization of space is an inversion of the impression of the “weightlessness” of distant planes of perspective into a scene of a local (the observer’s) appropriation of density and overexposure of the borderline texture of the newly created spatial entity. The installation that was created with the intention to *represent* and, in terms of perspective, render *more distant* the imaginary *spring landscape* set in the middle of real *wintery/white museum space*, at the same time *draws closer* the quality of an immanent experience: before us appears a unique paradox of being in a space we seem to have already occupied, recognizing an “event” we have already been through once and an almost palpable exteriorization of that experience.

The Way We Live features a plaster plaque in the gallery corridor inscribed with a series of ground plans of “real living places” with a note that invites the visitor’s participation. The artist suggests that the space we live in “*was re-created from memory, the memory of going through daily life, a life that is restricted by architecture and its static quality.*” That simple fact and reality in itself, the habits of movement and recognition of the surrounding environment, are always part of previously invested rituals and predominant signs of a given culture – way of living, movement, communication: “*They are sketches of deeply inscribed convictions, images and pictures that were and are well known to architecture, that show that how we use our given space is the only possible, correct and endless in its repetitions.*” The obsessive drawing of emptied halls, rooms, the limits of its walls, openings and passages, engraving of surfaces of corners and dead-end corridors, suggest that an attempt has been made to recreate memories of what the idea of a house or the primary function of living in a house could be. Is it to provide basic orientation through the architecture of a building? Is it to discover the privileged corners of space? Is it to appropriate them as if they were a territory? Is it to trace the passages of communication, borderline territories that connect the inner with the outer space? Is it to trace sites of genealogical memory? Without the intention of explaining or directing, the artist invites us to interact with the offered planes – to become aware of them, to de-space them, to add a drawing, to draw up plans within the dimensions of the existing space or some other “here” and “now.”

The quality of the present time and the concept of the *real* are again originally explored in the piece entitled *How Small Is the Universe*. In a completely dark, square room, a black square object of smaller dimensions but of identical proportions to the room is reproduced in its center. Suspended from the ceiling, the black square sits above the average height of the observers, allowing them to examine its interior. The polyethylene surface of the square object is perforated by a drawing; through the perforations a soft neon light shines, reflected in mirrors set in the upper part of the object. As the observer moves under this isolated part of the ceiling, coming closer and moving away, the reflections of light appear as variable configurations of imaginary thresholds of a starry night. A more energetic movement or shift from the suggested “meditation axis” would, according to the artist: *“shift the observer from the position where the image-landscape-expanse extends toward unknown depths, placing him/her into the emptiness of an architecturally defined entity. The floor he/she stands on becomes an image reflected by memory of the space to which up to a short time ago he/she directly belonged.”* The spatial coordination on the floor and the present time are articulated by the extent of the dark room in the changeable rhythms of localized emanation of light. These take place at an almost palpable (and simultaneous) point where ground and ceiling approach each other in an intensive and omnipresent intersection of disparate surface planes. As in all the works of Irena Lagator in which spatial coordination occurs in the continuum of a perception of unstable linearity, that will, with each observer’s new shift, configure the conventional space into a privileged space of his/her own universe and a habitacle-in-the-making.