



## IRENA LAGATOR PEJOVIĆ

### FOR THE COMMON GOOD

Water is a common good. A *common good* is also a catchphrase with which politicians of different inclinations justify their actions. A '*common good*' in the title of Irena Lagator Pejović's exhibition refers to both registers of reality: planetary and political, which can actually be seen as two sides of the same coin. Within the framework of her artistic intervention, Lagator focuses on the histories and imaginary iconographies of the current ecological emergency. The title of the exhibition derives, in fact, from the archival film *Iron Gate*, which documents the construction of the biggest European dam on the Danube River in Serbia in 1969.

The Danube is the river that connects Europe, flowing from the west to the east. The Bulgarian anthropologist Ivaylo Dichev argued that this may be the reason why "water is not perceived simply as water, but also as a vector of modernisation granted by the centre upstream to the periphery downstream."<sup>1</sup> In the documentary film appropriated by Lagator, the materiality of the water is linked with the notion of modernity, whereas the dam itself recalls the imaginary Iron Gate/Curtain that divided Europe between two different modernizing scenarios: state socialist and capitalist industrialization that approached nature merely as a resource. Water has been de-

Irena Lagator Pejović,  
Plastic Water, 2017

Irena Lagator Pejović, *Forward Play Reverse*, detail, 2019

finned within these two progress paradigms as a means of transport and energy; a resource used for agricultural, industrial and household purposes. In Lagator's work, water becomes the site and substance of exploration and study. In several of her works presented at the exhibition, the artist follows its currents and imitates its properties, becoming intimate with water.

The muted footage of *Iron Gate*, accompanied by two photographic images of temporary landfills, constitutes Lagator's installation *Forward Play Reverse*, in which the artist assumes a quasi-archaeological perspective. Lagator enacts an archaeology of future, excavating, visualizing and rendering palpable layers of material traces of human interventions in nature, staged under the banner of development. In addition to this new work, in Linz the artist presented a series of photos of *Plastic Water*, which shows seductive surfaces made of black plastic film that reflects the sun and visually imitates the water table. In reality, black plastic foil spread on the deforested field had been prepared for the storage of rubbish – it functioned merely as a massive rubbish bag to be filled with garbage and covered with soil. In 2004, Lagator artistically recaptured this surface and enacted a choreography of constant failure on this monotonous plastic proscenium. Dressed in white work uniform, the artist whirls wildly around her own axis until she no longer can. Her hectic dance can be described by using the notion of geochoreography, as proposed by the environmental artist Carolina Caycedo. In her ongoing project

*Be Damned*, which explores the effects that dams have on natural and social landscapes in several American bioregions, Caycedo employs the strategy of geochoreography (combined with other formats and materializations), described by the artist as geographies rewritten with bodies that are activated in natural but pampered areas, such as river banks and river beds. Documentation from Lagator's performance *Temporary Dumping Place: Rotations in the Given Space* was projected on the plastic foil placed on the floor, forcing viewers to assume a position akin to inspectors. By looking down at the work, they embodied the unbalanced relationship between humans and nature.

The ongoing work *Knowledge of the Limited Responsibility Society* completed the narrative of the exhibition, combining the problem of unlimited exploitation and destruction of the natural environment with an ethical utopian paradigm of unlimited responsibility. In this installation, which consisted of a cityscape created by volumes of fiscal receipts bound together as books, the artist comments directly on the condition of the lack of responsibility for the common world by exploring the idea of vanishing content. The information printed on the light-sensitive paper disappears over time and does not leave any traces of our extensive consumption of goods.

In this sequence of works, Lagator engages with ecology in a broad sense that can be captured by referring to Felix Guattari's conception of existential territories and three registers of ecology: environmental, social and mental.<sup>2</sup> In this light, Kenneth Friedman, in his elaboration on the notion of the word *environment* – wrongly used as a synonym for the word 'nature' – argues that "it should be evident in fact that it is the total environment (social, political, economic, cultural and natural) that affects our relationship to nature and ecology." Further, he emphasizes that "it is the decisions that human societies make that control their uses of nature and of the planet."<sup>3</sup> The presentation at the Catholic Private-University (KU) Linz examined the environmental dimension of Lagator's work in this sense and presented works that not only relate to the concept of environmental art, which deals with ecological concerns, but also works that approach the environment in a broader sense: works that remind us of the origin of the word 'environment', which means the world that we form around us through certain decisions.

## UNLIMITED RESPONSIBILITY

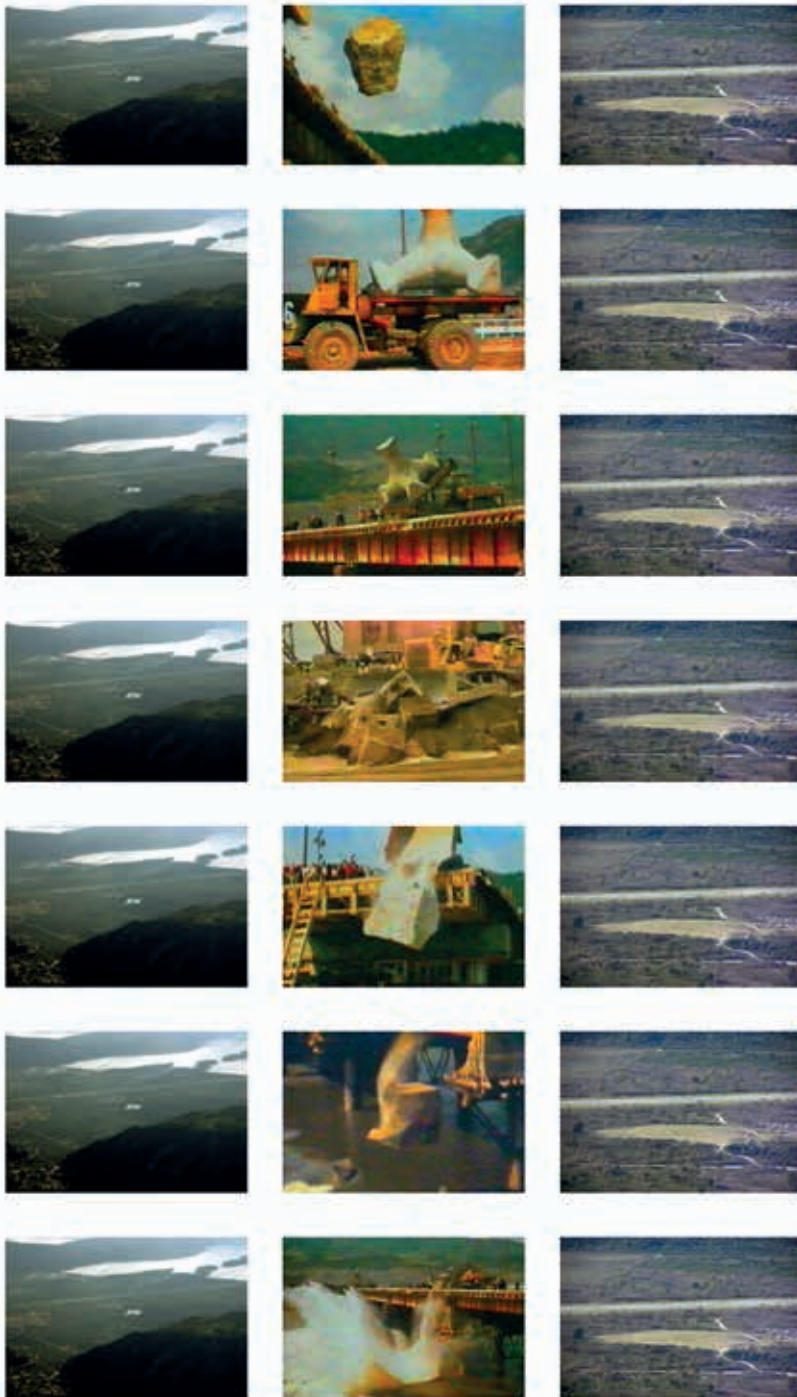
In her *Manifesto for Maintenance Art! 1969 – Proposal for an Exhibition "Care"*, Mierle Laderman Ukeles distinguished two basic systems that organize the social world: "Development: pure individual creation: the new, change, progress. Advance excitement, flight and fleeing" and "Maintenance: keep the dust off the pure individual creation;



Irena Lagator Pejović, Knowledge of the Limited Responsibility Society, 2012



Irena Lagator Pejović, Knowledge of the Limited Responsibility Society, detail, 2012



Irena Lagator Pejović, Forward Play Reverse, 2019

Irena Lagator Pejović, Temporary Dumping Place. Rotations in the Given Space, 2004, exhibition view at the Salon of the Museum of Contemporary Art Belgrade, 2006 ▶



preserve the new, sustain the change, protect progress; defend and prolong the advance; renew the excitement, repeat and flight!" The artist proposed to add to the revolutionary, post-1968 postulates a question: "After the Revolution, who's going to pick up the garbage on Monday morning?" In the same text, Ukeles distinguished three parts of maintenance art: personal, general and earth maintenance. These quotations help us to situate Irena Lagator's postulate of non-limited responsibility in the tradition of feminist care projects. Unlimited responsibility means not only to care for and change the world but also to maintain the changes and keep working. The premise of unlimited responsibility is a dream of harmony between people and within human and non-human elements of the eco-system. Lagator's works are at the same time documents of decay and of possibilities of care.

In their deliberation on the function of the document in the space of representation and discourse, RAQS Media Collective observes that: "[t]he art space cannot keep the troubled world at bay, and in order to apprehend reality as it is, in all its disarray, it has to permit the entry of the document as a 'stable' referent of the chaotic world it inhabits."<sup>4</sup> In other words, it is the responsibility of the artist to enhance the visibility of crises, but also to reformulate our ways of being and to reorient our ways of thinking. Lagator therefore does not merely visualize but aims to transform: she incorporates documentary material (film footage, photography, fiscal bills) into her installations, but uses them to create new forms of evidence. In place of a complex analysis of the way in which Integrated World Capitalism destroys us and our environment, the artist proposes transversal thinking that produces a unifying and utopian ethic of unlimited responsibility, aiming at something that, to use Guattari's terminology, can be named an ecosophical society.

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## Notes

- 1 Ditchev, Ivaylo, *The Danube Frontier*, in: Mueller-Pohle, Andreas (ed.), *The Danube River Projects*, Berlin 2007, 9–13, here 9.
- 2 Guattari, Felix, *The Three Ecologies*, Continuum Edition, London/New York 2008 (in French 1989).
- 3 Friedman, Kenneths S., *Words on the Environment*, in: Sonfist, Alan (ed.), *Art in the Land. A Critical Anthology of Environmental Art*, New York 1983, 253–256.
- 4 RAQS Media Collective, *Frist Information Report*, in: Merewether, Charles (ed.), *The Archive (Documents of Contemporary Art)*, Whitechapel Art Gallery, London 2006, 170–171, here 171.