

interview with yuko hasegawa sao paulo biennial

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Yuko Hasegawa: When I interviewed you previously, you had mentioned that you look for different communication tools, which you then use in your art. These tools would differ depending on nationality and cultural background. I would have thought that there would be a universal means of communication, like a carnival, or a parade as part of a national event. How relevant are these elements to your work?

avaf: We do believe in universal means of communication. The local research we do is usually related to getting new inspiration which allows us to come up with new tools – and we believe they are mostly universal even though at first born out of a specific location. The choice for different tools can come out of our exposure to a certain environment and determined by different cultural environments but not only. This choice is also determined by the effectiveness of these tools in expressing our ideas to the viewer/participant in different projects. Sometimes its also related to our own quest of achieving a new level of universal communication. Our intention is usually to transform the local into universal as we mix different strategies and inspirations in every project we are involved with. We don't believe in a linear thought or just one strategy. Because of that the detailed perception and understanding of our work is never one only. We believe in the spiral endless open close perception because what is most valuable about our pieces is the whole not its parts. Sometimes the forming parts can be more related to the local but in general the whole in our projects is pretty much the same, there is a common thread between our different pieces. And this whole incarnates an universal abstract force mostly related to freedom, to fulfilling your human being capacities to their peak. The elements which form the whole are merely tools of different levels of communicating, they are only a segment of the whole. Questionings and failures are part of our creative process and sometimes it's interesting for us to test new grounds, meaning proposing a tool that can look at first unfamiliar and turning it into universal language. Even though we react locally to a specific context, that same reaction can be used in another project. And that is exactly because we believe in this universality.

Yuko Hasegawa: The work you showed at Triangulo in Sao Paolo was jungle-like in structure. It changed depending on the context and the characteristics of the space, whether the venue was in Athens or at the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo. The theme of the slums was common to both Athens and the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo. What kind of research did you undertake for the work at Deitch and in Queens, and what was your response to that venue?

avaf: Demolition was the main concept behind our show at Deitch Studios in Long Island City. We've been interested in construction/destruction sites for a while, and we've been relating them to the more "spontaneous" architecture of slum areas. New York has been going thru a real state exploitation boom, and many areas in Brooklyn and Queens are being entirely remodeled specially around the river shore.

The pink fake façade structure in the middle of the main gallery was an homage to a very typical Brooklyn home, which is rapidly vanishing, since it got no evident historical value (they are constructed cheaply with plastic shingles and fake stone panels). They are either renovated so the landlords can ask for more money when renting it or simply destroyed to give way to new buildings. We spent two months with a van going around different neighborhoods in Brooklyn and Queens collecting trashed wood and other materials from various destruction sites.

The Deitch space was a perfect environment for a comment on this situation. First because the space itself represents the gentrification of that area which is changing so rapidly (a big New York gallery opening a new space in Queens). At the same time its localization – a warehouse right on the Queens waterfront, with an incredible view of Manhattan’s skyline – offers you the most idyllic landscape of New York city, the perfect postcard, unreal and dream-like. This view also incarnates the city’s dichotomies (putting the United Nations building and the Trump Tower side by side).

Inspired by all this, we decided to place the cartoonish nuke neon piece (a collaboration with artist Kenny Scharf, based on one of the nuclear bomb images he used in his paintings of the 80s) right in front of this skyline. It had some sort of a dual meaning for us: at the same time commenting on the destruction of this ideal image of New York city by the recent real estate boom and also proposing a call for action, a new beginning, an utopian beginning in which its own population could bomb the status quo. Besides that it also commented, of course, on America’s terrorist attack paranoia, the recent nuclear race and the country’s politics in the Middle East.

Related to the idea of destruction we also decided to incorporate in this show all this imagery of transvestites – in our view the ultimate goddesses of our contemporary world. Demolition goddesses, an attempt to re-construct their bodies to reach an ideal which is often failed. Goddesses of hyper feminineness, goddesses of imperfection, goddesses of faith in change, and also a persisting taboo, a burst of sexual and body freedom.

We applied the same demolition concept to our own work by re-interpreting previous pieces, like the giant trannie lady in the middle of the room (which was part of our Homocrap#1 install at the Ecstasy show at MoCA L.A). we decided to propose its destruction, this time chopped in the middle by the fake endangered Brooklyn façade. Destruction on top of destruction.

We adopted this strategy throughout the show, by either remixing previous imagery with new ones, or mixing it with some of our collaborator’s works. Some of the collaborators in fact also assumed this strategy and incorporated our imagery into their own works. In that sense, the concept of contamination, common to various of our projects, was extended to this more aggressive and in a way more challenging idea of demolition. Demolishing not only our own work and others, but also destroying the lines between different practices such as curator, producer, consultant, performer, etc. The result was an endless remix and

rebuild of our usual imagery and ideas.

The Deitch LIC space with its super high ceilings and columns also offered us a temple-like environment. The performances being held at the opening (by Color Wheel, Rick Castro, Escandalo and Vomidinglberry Movement Troupe) incorporated destruction ideas and offered ritualistic acts of freedom and change. The Demolition Disco area served as another ceremonial environment to invoke re-construction thru dance, performance, communal spirit and devotion, celebrating the destruction of values and of the utopian city.

Yuko Hasegawa: When you carried out your research on the Sanya area in Tokyo, every photograph taken as part of your records reflects your curiosity in the colors and unfamiliar textures. As a result, each photograph was itself like an artwork. Is the purpose of your research simply to gain an understanding of that site, or do you also research the culture—the music and visual culture of that place?

avaf: We definitely believe in both aspects. The research is fundamental to many levels in our strategy and it does become often also part of our imagery in the artworks we produce (like details of construction sites – textures, colors, architecture – usually become imagery for our wallpaper/decal pieces). The local research is not contained to a specific project though, and that’s due to our belief in the universality of communication. We used elements of our research in Tokyo in our installation at Deitch for instance. The level of research – how deep we go – depends on our availability unfortunately and our intimacy with the city where we making an installation. But one of the most important elements in our research period is to meet local people. We believe there are universal needs and beliefs, and whenever we do projects in different places, we looking for them first in the people that we encounter. We believe in common threads between human beings and that some sort supernatural force unites us sooner or later. You just have to be conscious of what you looking for and express it and people who share your views of the world will come to you.

Yuko Hasegawa: You appear to be very optimistic about, and see a lot of potential in, information technology that enables everyone to share and disseminate information. What are your thoughts, however, about the adverse effects of such individualism, such as the crimes perpetrated by net surfing otaku, the hikikomori phenomenon, and terrorist acts, and the lack of a sense of completeness and integrity?

avaf: The usual sense of completeness and integrity are not applicable to the world we live in nowadays. There are new values and ethics which still have not been incorporated to our laws. The phenomenons you mention are not necessarily created by our information technology society but more easily disseminated by them since communication is the base of our society today. This can be used in good and bad terms of course. We live in a fragmentary world. It’s impossible to understand and deal with it though through a constant search of the complete since our surroundings are fragmentary. People usually perceive the fragment in a negative way but maybe the fragment is the clue for a new perception, more suitable to the world we live in. Fragment is related to destruction,

destruction of the linear world we still believe we live in – but which we don't any longer. Paola Berenstein Jacques in her book "A Estética da Ginga: A Arquitetura das Favelas através da obra de Hélio Oiticica" (The Aesthetic of the Ginga: The Architecture of the Slums Through the Work of Hélio Oiticica) refers to the power of the Fragment and proposes a new positive approach to it: "The 'disorder' is necessary because of the power of the Fragment is present precisely in its anarchic potentials which provoke tensions. This way we can consider the confusion as temporary and the fragmentary order as order in construction, in transition, intermediary, in continuous transformation. The Fragment is a force of something we don't know the nature, of something that doesn't offer us any guarantee of renewal. The Fragment spreads the doubt. It can even be a piece, a step or even a whole, the opposite of itself. Chance begins.(...) The Fragment proclaims the silence and an internal truth, inside itself. Its space is the non-place, the middle space, the dislocated space, in suspension, transitory, in construction. A certain distance is necessary to comprehend the fragmentary space. It imposes the interval, the suspension. (...) To understand the fragmentary logic, it's necessary to renounce to the explanations of cause and effect, to the chain of conceptual development and, above all, to chronology. It's necessary to get used with mixing, with sketches, with superposing, and the resulting different forms of another temporal conception. The fragmentary time is not linear, it can be circular or even better, spiral, with different levels developing mutually. In it, the end and the beginning mix themselves, oppose to each other and then unite again."

Yuko Hasegawa: What do you believe the relationship should be between the Sao Paulo Biennale and that city itself? How would you describe the relationship between you and Sao Paulo?

avaf: Brazil is a country of dichotomies and that is the most visible and alive in a city like São Paulo. Its harshness, its ever growing immensity, its limitlessness, its violence, engulf its inhabitants and visitors, and that makes you feel like one with this giant living polluted sick fascinating organism which is São Paulo. We are little slave cells dominated by it. The city needs new approaches, new challenges, new contrasts and public actions are absolutely necessary to propose new visions and to install more power to its inhabitants. We've always thought the mix of the city's aggressiveness with Brazilian people's usual availability and curiosity to be the perfect recipe for an amazing public project. We've always dreamt about a Biennial that would spill throughout the city and not only be confined into Niemeyer's building. That type of action still lacking in most works the Biennial has exhibited so far. Even the connection with the surrounding Ibirapuera park is hardly ever addressed. There have been works (like Rubens Mano's Vazadores at the 25th Sao Paulo Biennial) which dealt with these issues but we still think the biennial should turn itself entirely outwards to the city. That being said, Ivo is definitely raising a series of questionings about the Biennial itself, its importance, the usual consideration of what an artwork is and the function of art itself in the contemporary world, as it seems to be usually detached from social issues.

Yuko Hasegawa: What are your expectations of multi-disciplinarity and how will you work within such a context?

avaf: Our expectations are less related to multi-disciplinarity (which is a given to the nature of this biennial and to our own work) and more related to public's participation. Multi-disciplinarity for our work is a tool to reach out to the viewer by proposing different ways to attach yourself to. We wish the space for our project would be even more open to the park as it was originally planned (by removing all the windows), turning it into some sort of a pilotis, a passage way, visited spontaneously by the Ibirapuera park's passerby. But in any case, we will be proposing a place of surprise and discovery, an organic living space that will contaminate and be contaminated by its visitors. We will be offering a few different actions throughout the week while we build the main structure that will host the final performance (with Black Meteoric Star). These actions will vary from lectures, night club, screenings, workshops, performance, dance classes, graffiti, etc. We see our function for this project as inciters, fomenters, provokers, arouasers of primordial beliefs of freedom and unification, knowledge, power and focus spread.