

Interview Barbara Holub – Celine Condorelli

CC

We could just start talking about things- and issues that may come up today we could continue through writing- writing questions you could answer via email. The first question is very general, but in terms of the more opportunities project and specifically the situation in Plymouth of undergoing massive regeneration, I was wondering if you could explain a little about your reading of the situation- especially in regards to this process and what this actually means to you?

BH

The term 'regeneration' struck me when I started to deal with several cities in the UK over the last years- because of its harmless and simply positive connotation. how does regeneration relate to what we know from the US as gentrification. Regeneration in England is the current synonym for massive changes of the urban fabric and of identity, a change from the industrial or postindustrial age to service society. In England there is a huge amount of funding going into those regeneration processes, whereas in former East-Germany money is lacking. Regeneration creates a new identity without really addressing the fact, that history actually disappears completely within a few years. Within one generation people lose touch of their roots and are imposed on let's say a new life. How do people deal with these changes? Do they consider these changes a future hope or simply a necessity which happens from the outside, without active involvement of themselves.

In Plymouth we are facing a very specific situation, because it is not the declining steel industry but the naval base and dockyards of Devonport which have been affected by major recession since the end of the cold war. For more than 300 years there was a very amicable, friendship based relationship between the dockyards as major employer and the people in Plymouth. Today we have to face the beginning of a complete makeover of that area as lost opportunity. Rather than considering the privatization of the dockyards and the return of part of the land a chance to develop a contemporary city centre for this underprivileged area (actually drawing on the historical role of that area which used to be the city centre until it was bombed out in WWII), we face an example of the win of the private among the public in this PPP. Obviously decision making was left in the hands of a private developer who created a housing quarter without public spaces or notions of urban life, disregarding the context and the needs of the area.

CC

So the city completely receded any responsibility towards the situation.

BH

That's what it seems like from my perspective as an outsider. At the same time, the dockyards started to set up a tourist visitors programme. The parallel existence of people still working, and at the same time you become a visitor of your own joblessness - I found that quite irritating.

CC

Regeneration, it seems, comes quite directly from biology, so that it is part of a scientific vocabulary, and therefore it really has to do with appearance and form, so that it is applied to plants, which suggests the fact that it is a concept within which cities are looked at as natural organisms which is extremely strange. Could you mention briefly how this process of regeneration appears: what is the shape of the city in regeneration?

BH

In my observation what is significant to regeneration is that the focus is on a specific part of the city, to develop and market it. The marketing aspect seems to be prevailing interest. These city quarters are exactly not treated as part of a natural organism, the city, as you mention it now. On the contrary, it seems as if the city is falling apart in a number of regenerated and themed areas, rather than having a concept for the city as a whole. Most of the time there is a radical change without any kind of natural growth.

CC

So that it looks completely disconnected. There is also something about fragmentation, right? So that some of the city's fragments are taken out and "treated".

BH

The residents or inhabitants of new areas become more part of this programme and of its marketing strategy, than being part of the city and the urban fabric with all its contradictions.

CC

There seems to be in your work a very particular notion of the public. Which has to do with the fact that it is not audience, it is not spectators, or merely actors, but a combination of all, and maybe something that has to do with what it means to take part in something? There isn't this binary relationship between audience or spectators and you as artist, they are more like actors. But there is a difference again between the acting in fiction and enacting in democracy, between the two there might be a notion of what it means to be public. And whom you are actually addressing both through the research and the work. So I was wondering if you could say something about your notion of a public.

BH

I consider "the public" as multitude of individuals who experience an art project for a limited amount of time, sometimes by chance, sometimes on purpose, depending on the setup of the piece. What I deliberately address in my pieces is the possibility of taking action or being involved in an activity within a distinct frame rather than consumption, but in a subtle way. There is always a kind of notion of treating it like an exercise, a rehearsal, an offer to try out a new role, a different one from the one one is used to – without having a clear understanding where all of that will be leading to, altogether an open ended experience.

I recently made something like an "election campaign" - without addressing it like this - for "Orientierungen" as part of the regionale08, a new festival in Southern Styria/ Austria. The exhibition dealt with concepts of orientalism and I developed veil-like objects out of used nylons and asked 4 women personalities from diverse cultural backgrounds and diverse relationships to islam, all living in Austria, to pose for posters which were installed on poster stands typical for election campaigns in Austria in the country side. The specifics of the posters are that there are blankouts instead of texts. So the message is quite irritating – since there is no message except for the ambivalence of the image. The public could be wondering if now women somehow related to islam are candidates for elections, without knowing the specifics of what kind of election this campaign stands for. At the same time the performers are real personalities, whose biographies are made public in the exhibition hall, the Kunsthalle Feldbach. So again, there is always this tension between the specific individual and the unknown public in my work.

CC

But also I guess because whoever is coming to see the exhibition, the individuals walking around are also part of the wider public addressed by the issues. They come from the city that you are talking about, they probably have personal or historical relationships with some of the issues that are coming through. In Plymouth I thought it must have been quite striking how you are offering also a possibility to take part again, or anew, in a conversation or negotiation with the city's own history. The connection with fiction is really obvious, but it also does a subtle and ambiguous play between the scenario that is happening in the gallery, and how that has to do with the particular inhabitation of the city on a much wider scale as well.

BH

It was the 1st time that I addressed an existing situation in the actual city, where the show took place. Usually projects like this play with a certain kind of exoticism, which means that the artist shows a situation from somewhere else, also to create a somewhat safe distance. I think this is

very much how the art production works at the moment. We are interested in looking at “the other”, but we are bored with being confronted with our own situation. Also of course it is a bit of a tangible thing to do, since as an outsider you have a specific reading of a situation which I didn't want to be document or comment. I am rather interested in taking an concrete situation to another level which opens up questions and possible visions relevant to other situations.

CC

These issues have evolved over time as well, that is the really interesting movement between the individual taking part and the city one is dealing with. The issues of regeneration really have to do with all the different scales, the scale of the city, of the individual, the scale of the state. But what is interesting I think is the particular attitude, and this brings me to my next question. You always start from a very specific situation, in a way, a micro-history, and a careful analysis of this specific, immediate situation. I was wondering whether you thought this could have any relationship with a feminist agenda?

BH

it is interesting that you ask that question. Recently I became interested in involving more women in my work, and in looking at my role as a woman as part of larger power structures. Being trained as an architect, I was always aware of the system and the borders and limits women are facing within that system. But rather than pointing out these limits in an explicit way, I always looked for a parallel strategy, based on Michel de Certeaus technique of the “peruque”, a disguise – a strategy of “preconceived fiction”. To deal with these issues from a visionary point, as if we had already overcome these limits.

CC

yes it doesn't have to be such a public agenda, but maybe it is a medium. That in a way is an attitude I can really relate, that I don't think that there is an explicit feminist agenda in your work, I just suddenly realized that this methodology, looking from the really specific clear situation as a political situation, and extracting from it some much larger issues in a way, relates to feminist theory and its particular notion of politics, of the political.

BH

If it is addressed like this, then I have to say that 100% I do come from a feminist awareness as a woman. But what I would never like is to use characteristics that we connect with a feminist art practice. This would narrow down the issues and create categories again...

CC

The next question is about function. Coming from a concern with how to exorcize disciplinary differences, especially art and architecture- the practices of which can stretch, at one end of the spectrum with someone like Pardo, and at the other end with someone like you, with or without transparadiso, that deal with very political urban realities. Function, is often defined by a set of client relations, it has to do with requirements or conditions of a site, things like rules and regulations, and how that relationship with the client is articulated. One of your explicit tools is fiction, which for me is very interesting as it has to do with the past as much as the future, something that has maybe been lost and a possible future: it is a projection, maybe the projection that could be called regeneration, or not. But this is why I was wondering, what is the function of fiction? Can we say that this fiction also has a social function?

BH

I consider fiction as a tool when we talk about architecture, situated right in between my artistic practice and my involvement with architecture. In both cases it works with allowing to transgress the limit of what we consider to be safe. Fiction serves as a tool which I apply deliberately in my work as an artist- which is about my own fiction, a very personal one, with its particular ideas of beauty for example, which I want to offer to other people so that they can overlay their own fictions and visions.

CC

Can you tell me something about the film that you were using? "Voyage to the bottom of the sea". The relation to this fiction film is very much about that, isn't it, how suddenly this sci-fi becomes a voice for certain possibilities or imaginations.

BH

It functions in such an exaggerated way, with a beautiful set design from the culture of the 1960's in strong contradiction to the hardship of working in a submarine of course. "Voyage to the bottom of the sea" points out this simple mission of wanting to save the world. We do not want to and cannot save the world anymore- who could say that today? This naivety that we are longing for to keep, which we had as children, also has to do with why we work as artists...

CC

There is a strong element in your work that has to do with giving voice. Listening to a situation. This has to do with the hidden potential and the opportunities that haven't been taken up, but also very much with things unsaid, the voices that didn't really get heard through the process of history. Which is always a particular history. Can you see the work, and particularly the protest, as a protest for what cannot be heard or spoken yet. And how that relates to issues of invisibility,

or blindness.... and things that we might not even be able to see yet.

BH

The “silent demonstration” is a demonstration without words, without propaganda – deconstructing and thus pointing out the obsolete function of a demonstration today.

Blindness could be considered the common denominator of our living situation today. The more we know about our living conditions in the world today (and fate and fact is that we cannot withdraw from all that information anymore), the more we have to be “blind”/ black out certain information in order to survive as individuals. The challenges are too big to face in order to survive in a mentally healthy condition.

So I consider blindness a possible tool you suggest, a tool to focus on the essential – in whichever way one might define that.

CC

so it is giving voice somehow- and listening to the situation in a different way, to the invisible voices.