

A DOUBLE GAME

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When we talk about the work of Jasmina Cibic, we must never lose sight of its complexity. Although the images and situations she creates are extremely recognizable and, in a way, “seduce” the viewer, they are never merely that. The artist’s “total works of art” underscore the questions and urge us to contemplate the relationships that arise within the triad “the work of art – the politics of representation – the viewer”. With regard to her medium, Cibic has, from the start of her independent art career, been interested primarily in performative interventions and installations, which she occasionally supplements with photography, video, and film. Her complex works, often installed in public places outside the gallery walls, are adapted to the specific space or context; as a result, because of their particular properties and “mode of distribution/strategy”,¹ they can only function in a certain environment. Similarly, it is possible to see a transition from one work to the next through the development of concepts or new formal solutions. The basic gesture, as it were, in Cibic’s artistic explorations is the dismantlement and careful analysis of the work of art, its representation, and its relationship to the viewer: she tries to operate inside the system she is investigating; the mechanisms and structures of the system thus often become integral parts of the artist’s practice, allowing her to transcend the plane of art and the language of form. Because of their traversal of different structures and systems, the artist’s projects often feel like *Gesamtkunstwerke* – total works of art – which include variations of delegated creations of artistic objects and spaces and combine the work of architects, scientists, other specialists and craftsmen, as well as factory-made products, all chosen

1 “Exhibiting or displaying work for the public always implies a kind of strategic relationship, even if the work is wholly autonomous and self-contained and if the exhibition space seems completely neutral (the so-called ‘white cube’, for example, only seems neutral, as it is related to a specific public, institutional network, group of experts and collectors). Art as such can only realize itself in relation to an audience and it is precisely in the act of defining this relationship that we inevitably encounter a kind of global strategic idea, an idea that determines the individual aspects of the work appearing in public, from the exhibition design details (lighting, dominant or marginal positions,

etc.) to the question of which institutional (or non-institutional) space to mount the work in, for which public it is primarily targeted, and the like. In short, in the most general sense of the term, ‘exhibition strategy’ is a global concept, a sensible collection of procedures and approaches aimed at ensuring that the work will be seen in the right light by the right viewer.” (Igor Zabel, “Exhibition Strategies in the 1990s: A Few Examples from Slovenia,” tr. Ljubica Klančar, *Contemporary Art Theory*, JRP/Ringier, Zurich, and Les presses du réel, Dijon, 2012], p. 128.) [The translation has been slightly corrected. – Tr.]

for some specific contextual or historical significance. The project *For Our Economy and Culture* presents a kind of synthesis of Cibic's past conceptual and formal investigations, while its basic concept touches on the conceptual viewpoint of "The Encyclopaedic Palace", the main theme of the 55th Venice Biennale, and also builds on it: it directly addresses the utopianism of the concept by conscripting the role of choice or selection. Given the biennale's typical form, based on the traditional idea of national selections of artists, this particular element is more relevant than ever, as it points directly to the powerful role of the mechanisms that create the framework of geopolitical iconographies.² On the formal level, the artist combines various elements from her past work. She constructs her point of departure – which is also the heart of the project – on the fact that the Slovenian Pavilion is situated architecturally in a rearticulated residential building, which speaks more about the private and intimate sphere than about public engagement. By intervening architecturally (creating a disposition³) and, as a result, directing the viewer's gaze, the artist formulates the exhibition space as a relationship between public and private; more specifically, by conscripting the language of official state architecture (public), she reformats the existing pavilion as a boudoir (private). The connecting element in this architectural disposition is the wallpaper, which features images of the beetle *Anophthalmus hitleri*, an insect endemic to Slovenia and a failed national icon – a species that almost became extinct thanks to its ideologically charged name. Conceptually, the architectural disposition and the images on the wallpaper meet primarily in a questioning of the state's relationship to the choice of a national iconography, or more precisely, to

2 In the context of the 54th Venice Biennale (2011), Boris Groys responded to questions from the curators of the Central Asia Pavilion about the issue of pavilions and national participation:

What role does national participation play in [the] artistic situation of a country? Does this participation have any productive impact over the national art scene, apart from just representation? – To many, the exhibition in the national pavilion in Venice seems as a kind of demonstration of achievements of the country. Expectations, sense of participation in an international competition, and the hope for success in this competition, linked with this national participation mobilize interest in contemporary art in these countries. And this in itself is not bad, although, of course, all of these motivations are completely illusory.

Why do you think the principle of national participation is so rigid? Is it at all possible that [the] Venice Biennale

will [one day] quit [the] reproduction and labelling of geopolitical hierarchies? – It seems to me that the concept of national art cannot be dispensed [with] in any foreseeable time. The fact is that museums, art academies, schools and universities with art faculties are all national properties. International art institutions do not exist. There is an international art market, but it cannot provide [the] sustainable existence and traditioning of art. So reliance on [a] national art institution for the arts so far has no alternative.

(“Venice Biennale. National Participations: Questions from the curatorial [team] of the Central Asia Pavilion,” *Lingua Franca: Central Asia Pavilion*, <http://www.cap2011.net/survey.htm>. For the sake of convenience, Groys's responses are here placed directly after the respective questions of the curators.)

3 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, tr. Richard Nice, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. (USA), 1982, pp. 466–484.

the representation of art within the established models of the national. The artist juxtaposes two visual-art elements to the architectural disposition. A selection of still-life paintings from the art collection of the Slovenian National Assembly is transformed through the artist's gesture (the force of the context) into a kind of rectified "ready-made" object, which in the most representative way introduces the "strategies" of past ideological models into the project – showing directly that, with such collections, exhibitions, and national selections of artists, we cannot avoid the question of an ideological choices. The installation is rounded out by two films that dramatize the contradictions inseparably connected with transformations of past and present national identities and, as a direct but unfinished dialogue between art and architecture, question their reciprocal influences in the formulation of national iconographies and their echoes in the present day.

Directing the Gaze

Cibic has borrowed the title of her project – *For Our Economy and Culture* – from an article by Dr. Milan Dular, published in *The Chronicle of Slovene Cities* [*Kronika slovenskih mest*] in 1940, where he presented the idea of the first organized exhibition of national production in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the Ljubljana Fair.⁴ In his article, Dular highlighted the role and underlying principle of the architectural strategy developed by the architect Vinko Glanz, one of the leading figures and ideologues of official state architecture. Glanz's architecture, and his ideological concept for the Ljubljana Fair in particular, are based on researching the presentation of national icons selected by the state as representative. His architecture, in this respect, relates undoubtedly to the concept of the national pavilions at the Venice Biennale, which in one way or another represent "national authorities". It would seem that one of the key questions Cibic is asking in this context is: What artwork, artist, or invention is representative enough to represent the nation and how must it direct the viewer's gaze? In her project for the Slovenian Pavilion, Cibic is dealing mainly with the experience of the object, which is always constituted in relation to a space, to the architectural disposition or gesture. By creating an architectural disposition in which artworks are placed, she directs us (the viewer) above

⁴ Milan Dular, "Ljubljanski sejem za naše gospodarstvo in kulturo" [The Ljubljana Fair for our economy and culture], *Kronika slovenskih mest*, vol. 7, no. 2 (1940), pp. 77–84.

all towards the role of architecture and its relation to visual art. She underscores their interdependence, in which the former is not merely a function of the latter, for through an awareness of the building's original function a reciprocal dialogue is set up that frames and defines the active dialogue with the viewer. Cibic identifies architectural strategies and elements Glanz developed inside the buildings he rearticulated for the new state. These speak not only of an architecture that must announce the new state, but, indeed, also of the invention of a language – one that was not meant to speak obviously to its own roots but that would instead construct the idea of nation-building in new ways. In the Slovenian Pavilion, by incorporating these architectural solutions, Cibic conscripts the language of state architecture (public), which, however, she uses to transform the entire exhibition space into a boudoir (private). Through this gesture, she performs a formal/conceptual inversion that, in the context of her created architectural disposition, underscores the relationship between public and private. Two apparently opposite types of architecture with completely different primary functions become, through the artist's conceptual intervention and their "juxtaposition", an architectural model that testifies to one thing alone: the creation of a display, or architectural disposition, that directs the viewer's gaze. Official public architecture and the intimate setting of a boudoir each in its own way creates a space and situation in which the visitor both observes and is observed at one and the same time. Both architectural elements work as a *theatre box*⁵ and can be conceived as a spatial/psychological means for recognizing power and systems of control. In this case, the created architectural disposition helps form "the strategy of the artwork" and reveals a powerful common denominator in the two different architectural types. Both are based on almost an identical principle: the "strategy" of a kind of panopticon, which, due to their (differing) primary functions (public/private), operates within different social structures that are normally separated. In *For Our Economy and Culture*, however, Cibic demonstrates their common core/"strategy", for in both there is, as it were, a direct address to the viewer in the observation and creation of a space of pleasure – whether through the authoritarianism of state architecture or the intimacy of the boudoir.

5 Beatriz Colomina, "The Split Wall: Domestic Voyeurism", in Beatriz Colomina, ed., *Sexuality and Space*, Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 1996, p. 76.

The Image of *Anophthalmus hitleri*

Another key principle in Jasmina Cibic's work is the delegated creation of individual elements of her installations; in this way she is able to enter systems that are not as a rule part of contemporary visual art. The different individual elements in the artist's "choreography" act to complement each other and together form a multi-layered whole that requires multiple directions of reading. A remarkably beautiful example of collaboration is the element that serves as a kind of connector in the architectural disposition – the wallpaper with the repeated images of the beetle *Anophthalmus hitleri*. The story behind the image begins with the discovery of the endemic Slovenian beetle, which was first observed by the cave explorer Vladimir Kodrič in Pekel Cave near Celje in 1933; four years later, the entomologist Oskar Scheibel confirmed the discovery of the new species and, as a Nazi supporter, named it *Anophthalmus hitleri*. On the conceptual level, Cibic associates the endemic species with national architecture and foregrounds the issue of constructing and establishing the mechanisms of national identity through a nation's icons. On the formal level, however, we have an example of a delegated artwork, since each piece of wallpaper displays more than forty different "variations" of the *Anophthalmus hitleri* beetle, all made by international entomologists and scientific illustrators.⁶ In keeping with the artist's instructions, the scientists' representations of the beetle had to be based solely on their experience in the field of entomology and their interpretation of the insect's Latin name: they were not allowed to look for existing visual or descriptive references. The wallpaper presents an almost encyclopaedic series of depictions of the endemic insect and provides a formal background to the visualization of the issue of ideological models. By reproducing and multiplying *ad infinitum* images of *Anophthalmus hitleri*, Cibic seeks to problematize the discourse through a critical treatment of ideologically conditioned themes and their removal or withdrawal upon contact with a new political regime, new structural order, or simply the conscripting of a new authority.

6 To produce the series of illustrations of the *Anophthalmus hitleri* beetle, Jasmina Cibic collaborated with more than forty entomologists and scientific illustrators – from the Museum of Natural History in London, the United States Department of Agriculture, the Museum of Zoology of the University of Tel Aviv, and other institutions.

Still Life as Strategy

The reasons and strategies behind the mechanisms that lead to an object being included in a collection or particular space – somewhere the chosen object will be encountered by a viewer and trigger their entrance into the internal process of an experience – are of various kinds. The viewer's opportunity to have the experience does not depend on whether the decision to include the object in the collection was personal, scholarly, commercial, ideological, or political in nature. What makes the viewer's experience possible is not the object itself but the contextual frame in which it is set.⁷ The group of objects, or more precisely, the selection of paintings from the art collection of the Slovenian National Assembly,⁸ which Cibic recontextualizes in *For Our Economy and Culture*, reveals to the viewer the relationships between the economic, political, cultural, and personal values of a certain time and space. In addition, the art collection occupies a position of ambivalence: although it is public property, public access to it is in fact not possible, or rather, is possible only under certain conditions, since the paintings are scattered throughout the work spaces of the National Assembly building, where the state security service has strict controls in force. This is not one of the national art collections housed in storage rooms, but rather a collection of artworks that, by virtue of their location in the work spaces of parliamentary politics and administration, serve as a kind of background or stage scenery for the media whenever they want to create the spectacle that answers to the name "the state". The selected paintings – made by artists from various periods⁹ – are in the genre of the still life, which in a way is connected to one of the elements in the project's created architectural disposition: namely, the directed gaze of the viewer. At the same time, however, through the artist's conceptual intervention, this same selection of paintings becomes a rectified "ready-made" object, which, in the most representative way, reveals the "strategies" of the ideological models of both past and the present and shows directly that, with such

7 Grafenauer Petja, "Jasmina Cibic", in *An Idea for Living. Realism and Reality in Contemporary Art in Slovenia*, U3 - 6th Triennial of Contemporary Art in Slovenia. Moderna galerija, Ljubljana, 2010, p. 25.

8 The mosaics and frescoes that adorn and enrich the interior of the parliament building are the work of several distinguished Slovenian artists: Jože Ciuha, Ivo Šubic, Marij Pregelj, and Ivan Seljak-Čopič. In the reception halls and other rooms, we find works by other well-known Slovenian painters: Rihard

Jakopič, Matija Jama, Matej Sternen, Božidar Jakec, France Slana, Ivan Grohar, Ivana Kobilca, Gojmir Anton Kos, Nikolaj Omersa, Veno Pilon, Riko Debenjak, and France Kralj – as well as, more recently, works by contemporary Slovenian painters: Janez Boljka, the Irwin group, Andrej Jemec, Bogoslav Kalaš, Žiga Kariž, Vladimir Makuc, Marjan Pogačnik, Jože Spacal, Miha Štrukelj, the duo V.S.S.D., Karel Zelenko, and others. (See the National Assembly of Slovenia, *Državni zbor*, ed. Gordana Vrabec, National Assembly Office of Public Affairs, Ljubljana, 2009, p. 19.)

collections, exhibitions, or national selections of artists, we cannot avoid the question of ideological choices. If the entrance to the Slovenian National Assembly is a space where the ideas of the current political elite collide with the ideas of the people (i.e. a public space), then the still lifes speak primarily of the private work – the backstage work – of deputies and state administrators. And not least of all, in the case of the selected paintings, we are dealing with a kind of souvenir par excellence, for the artwork occupies a position equal to the floral “still lifes” on the conference tables in the National Assembly – the position of decoration in the stage scenery of the “political show”. In one way or another, Cibic has long been investigating the multi-layered meanings of objects that have been designated by the mechanisms of various systems (art, science, technology, industry, etc.) as possessing the potential to trigger an experience in the viewer. This is why our experiences are so often “conditioned” by predetermined ideas – by personal, economic, political, aesthetic, or cultural parameters. In the context of visual art, perhaps one of Cibic’s planes of interest in *For Our Economy and Culture* is precisely this relationship between the “naked” object and its potential symbolic meaning, which triggers and makes possible the experience.

The Fruits of Our Land

The second visual-art element that is juxtaposed to the architectural disposition in Cibic’s project is made up of two live-action films that reveal the contradictions inseparable from the transformations and representations of national identities over time through architecture and visual art. The scripts of the two films, *Framing the Space* and *The Fruits of Our Land*,¹⁰ are taken word for word from the stenographic minutes of a session of the Commission for the Review of Artistic and Sculptural Works in the New Palace of the People’s Assembly¹¹ – a document that was discovered a few years ago among the posthumous papers of the architect Vinko Glanz. The minutes relate to a discussion between a political functionary,

9 The artists represented in the selection from the National Assembly’s art collection are: Ljubo Babić, Rihard Jakopič, Bogoslav Kalaš, Ivana Kobilca, Miha Maleš, Stane Kregar, France Mihelič, Nikolaj Omersa and Lojze Perko.

10 Cibic takes the title of her film *The Fruits of Our Land* [*Plodovi naše zemlje*] from the title of an artwork that Gabrijel Stupica, the most respected Slovenian painter of the time, was intending to make for the newly erected parliament building. After the session of the Commission for the Review of Artistic and

Sculptural Works, however, a resolution was passed to reject Stupica’s artwork, which therefore never realized.

11 The session took place in Ljubljana, at the People’s Assembly of the People’s Republic of Slovenia, on 9 March 1958. Present were Anton Bizjak, the leader of the People’s Assembly; the architect Vinko Glanz; the art historians Lojze Gostiša, Luc Menaše, and Stane Mikuž; and the urban planner Lojze Rojec.

an urban planner, an architect, and several art historians about which artists should be selected to create the mosaics, murals, and sculptures for the entrance to the People's Assembly building (the parliament). From beginning to end, the discussion revolves around the issue of whether the artist and artwork are suitable enough to represent the Slovenian nation appropriately: the commission members are trying to define the criteria for "suitability", which right from the start are (openly) ideological. Reading the different positions in the stenographic record reminds one of the classic film *Twelve Angry Men*:¹² as in the film, we feel an atmosphere full of theatricality and claustrophobic tension, which arises mainly from ideological prejudices and personal affinities. The position of individuals in contact with the mechanisms and rules of the ideological "machine" brings about massive conflict, which, in the session minutes (and in Cibic's filmed dramatization) seems completely impossible – a conflict over impartial judgement. This subject is addressed directly by Cibic's two films, which are free of any ideological markers and seek to distance themselves from the political circumstances of the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia in the 1950s. The characters who appear in the films are free of labels relating to such things as nationality or profession, which in fact makes them seem completely "anonymous". They are defined only by their dialogue with each other and the expression of their individual views; consequently, they seem universal and, as protagonists, are no longer tied to any specific geopolitical phenomenon but rather become the protagonists of "the mechanisms of a universal ideology" that could happen anywhere and anytime. Cibic, then, is not recapsulating any specific ideological model; instead, she directly reveals mechanisms that are more broadly applicable and that belong to ideologies both in the past and in the present.

Searching for the Point of Emancipation

For Our Economy and Culture is, then, a kind of synthesis of Cibic's past projects, as it contains all the elements of her artistic practice. In terms

12 Directed by Sidney Lumet in 1957, the film is a classic legal drama that prompts us to think about the fairness and accuracy of individual decisions and, more generally, about the way we resolve the complex situations we encounter every day.

of its message, the project traverses the concepts of ideology and art, for it attempts from the outset to reveal the mechanisms of ideology – their contribution to the creation of national myths and their manner of presentation. A walk through Cibic's project offers at every step only further confirmation of Althusser's thesis that visual art is part of the cultural ideological apparatus of the state, in that its operation relies consistently on the mechanisms of ideology.¹³ Art is ideology, which is why the message part of the project conditions the realization of the architectural/visual-art elements in the rooms of the Slovenian Pavilion at the 55th Venice Biennale. More than ever, Cibic's thinking about the relationships between the architectural disposition, the artwork, and the viewer is at the forefront. Architectural reformation and context seem to have become an integral part of her thinking about her practice – which shows directly that in the context of art it is no longer possible to speak about the object itself, but we must always speak about its relation to the display and the message's framework. The project attempts to reflect on social values of both past and present, which are not fixed; it seeks, again and again, to create dialogue with the viewer, with his past and present, his political, cultural, economic, and personal experiences, which all come together to form a separate experience within the national pavilion. It tries to find the viewer's point of emancipation: something that sees, feels, and understands.¹⁴ The artist stealthily underscores the neglected relationship between the material element (the exhibition space) and the non-material element (the experience) and draws attention to the "possibility" or "impossibility" of perceiving the artwork. Her project *For Our Economy and Culture*, it seems, is a kind of total work of art, which exists not in the composition of the material elements and things, but in the tension created through their relationship to the specific space and the viewer. The work of art becomes something inescapable but at the same time elusive and yet always remarkably immediate, for the spatial component is constantly changing in its relation to the viewer, and in this way it also avoids the conventions of an exclusively haptic perception. Cibic's total intervention derives from the particularity of the gallery space and plays directly with the viewer's

13 Louis Althusser, *Izbrani spisi* [Selected writings], tr. by Zoja Skušek, Založba / *cf, Ljubljana, 2000. In Althusser's view, the cultural ideological apparatus of the state (literature, visual art, sport, etc.) must not be confused with the state's repressive apparatuses (government, administration, the army, the police, the judicial system, etc.): the latter rely mainly on the use of force (sometimes physical), while the state's ideological apparatuses (culture, education, religion, etc.) rely primarily on the use of ideology.

14 See Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, tr. Gregory Elliott, Verso, London, 2009, p. 13.

experience of the material reality of the world. By reinterpreting the visual-art elements the artist attempts to set them in a completely new relationship to the space. She challenges viewers to use all their senses at once in order to perceive the relationship between the object and the space, and by so doing she also moves onto the plane of the ephemeral. The viewer is involved inescapably, through the direction of his gaze, in the interdependent relationship between art and architecture, while his perception is completed as a whole on the ideological and conceptual level. The project *For Our Economy and Culture* thus plays a double game: on the one hand, through a convincing gesture of complementarity between the individual elements it gives us a feeling of certainty, for it speaks directly to the basic experiences of the viewer's past and present; on the other hand, however, the same total "choreography" of these elements is precisely what asks new questions of the viewer and triggers a slight uncertainty at the thought of the future.