

CURATOR'S INTRODUCTION

Anna Gritz

Jasmina Cibic's installation *Give Expression to Common Desires* at MGLC Ljubljana forms the second chapter in the three-part exhibition series *Spielraum*, which was initiated at the Ludwig Museum Budapest in early 2015, and which concluded with its final chapter at the Salon of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade in late 2015. The subtitle of the exhibition, *Give Expression to Common Desires*, stems from the script "Starting", written for the film presented in the first chapter of *Spielraum* and edited by the artist and writer Tim Etchells. The text is an amalgam of excerpts from political speeches on art and architecture dating from the twentieth century, by key speakers such as Mussolini, Mitterrand, Thatcher and Tito, who employ the symbolism of architecture and architectural rhetoric to mask their political message.

In *Give Expression to Common Desires* Jasmina Cibic continues to draw references from the plans and designs for the inaugural conference of the Non-Aligned Movement in Belgrade in 1961—a singular meeting of representatives of states without alignment to the major political power blocs of the time, with the aim to rethink international relationships and alliances outside of the Cold War binary. Cibic reconfigures selected visual elements taken from the original sketches, plans and drawings for the redesign of the city on the occasion of the conference, resulting in an eclectic architectural language that intended to redefine the image and political message of the city.

For the exhibition at MGLC Ljubljana, Cibic reconstructed one isolated architectural element in the exhibition space: the multicoloured stained glass ceiling from the grand staircase of the former Palace of the Federation in Belgrade. This architectural quotation is paired with a group of black sculptural elements in geometric shapes that double as movable gallery seating, and whose shapes derive from the same architectural programme conceived for the First Summit of the Non-Aligned Movement. Presented in a flexible arrangement, the sculptures double as scores when activated by intermittent performances during which two dancers would push, pull and rearrange the fragments in a choreography that continuously repositions the objects like letters or words, suggesting that each new placement has the potential to generate an entire new set of meanings. In the second room at MGLC Cibic presented a new film that was shot in its entirety on the site of the previous chapter—within the exhibition setting at the Ludwig Museum

Budapest. The film, scored by musician Simon Fisher Turner, makes use of the sculptural and decorative elements in the exhibition and employs them as a semantic system that is acted out in performances across the galleries. Exhibition architecture and exhibited architecture are consciously confused in the film, resulting in the two exhibiting and framing one another. Staying within the interconnected logic of the exhibition series, the reconstructed stained-glass ceiling doubles as an architectural trailer or clue for the next chapter of *Spielraum*, taking place in the location of the Former Palace of the Federation itself and thereby closing the system of references.

Representative architecture has always functioned as a stage for political action and a vehicle for political thought. Architecture cannot be seen simply as a passive backdrop, since the buildings function as actors and settings, choreographing the action and interaction that will take place within them. Cibic's work, however, makes it apparent that the staging of a space is not only dependent on the stylistic characteristics of its architecture, but equally on the nature of the actions performed in it, as well as the way and the context in which they are mediated. The decision to appropriate and restage the stained-glass ceiling as an architectural fragment and ideological tool in the exhibition space questions what it means to represent one form of architecture inside another. Cibic identified the ceiling from the former Palace of the Federation as a crucial object in the building's identity, a signifier of the nature and mission of the space. The geometric colour blocks of pastel pink, blue, yellow and orange were rebuilt, fitted to the ceiling of the gallery space and illuminated by the existing lighting system, while the walls of the space were disguised by a grey curtain that enhanced the stage-like presence of the ceiling and the sculptural objects below.

The act of repeating the architectural quotation underneath the actual ceiling of the gallery space allows it to pose as a genuine structural element of the host architecture and therefore turns the fragment into an architectural costume, a mask or a form of drag in which one form of architecture masquerades as another. Although the function of the element remains the same—it is still a ceiling that is illuminated from above—the act of transporting a vital aesthetic component from its birthplace and liberating it from its original context results in a drastic change in its symbolic connotation. The art historian Steven ten Thije

recognises an interesting spatial quality in the idea of the mask, identifying “a behind the mask and a before the mask”.¹ It is a dichotomy that he sees quickly disintegrating once one becomes aware of what a mask conceals, much like the mask itself which consists of a “conglomerate of qualities” that make masking a blurry subject.² However, his suggestion to pay attention to the point where the mask and the masked meet is a fertile position for the analysis of Cibic's work as a strategy of decontextualising items infused with ideology and probing them for their ideological potential out of context and in conversation with the politics of another space. Two political systems, and two architectural languages, meet in this case in the exhibition space at the MGLC, a space that, while often assumed to be neutral, comes laden with its own set of dogmata.

The key to this chapter of the project, and perhaps to Cibic's work at large, is her play with fragmentation. Cibic identifies basic building blocks, be it in language, design or architecture, and represents them isolated from their former context, in the exhibition space. Upon encountering the quarantined fragments, the visitor cannot help but attempt to reconstruct them, to imagine them in their original formation, and in doing so attempts to reimagine the foundation of ideological and political thought attached to them. Each element speaks of its place of origin, infused with a variable effective half-life and charged with former ideologies that only slowly cool down over time. Cibic investigates these properties outside of their accustomed habitat and isolated from their reality as communicative mediums charged (and recharged) with meaning and political agenda.

In *Give Expression to Common Desires*, Jasmina Cibic focuses more closely on the theatrical properties of the patriotic spectacle. Through re-envisioning representative architecture as an isolated element, suspended between backdrop, prop, theatrical set, sculpture and mask, the exhibition invokes political enactments referencing protocol and ritual while reimagining their potential freed of the burden of context and political narrative.

¹ ten Thije, Steven, “Reading (through) the Mask, Philosophical Reflections on the Masquerade”, (*Mis)Reading Masquerade*, Frédérique Bergholtz and Iberia Pérez eds, Berlin: Revolver Publishing, 2010, p 50.

² ten Thije, “Reading (through) the Mask”, 2010, p 50.