

CURATOR'S INTRODUCTION

Una Popović

The third and final chapter of the *Spielraum* film trilogy was shot in Belgrade and had its premiere as part of a solo exhibition at the Salon of the Museum of Contemporary Art. On the one hand, the film and the eponymous exhibition, titled *Tear Down and Rebuild*, follow the narrative strands of the previous exhibition units and represent possible thematic and spatial fragments of a single story. On the other hand, they can be read as the outcome of a project that aims to rethink the nature of architecture and its potential political role—in other words, the ways in which architecture and art (can) act as soft power strategies implemented by a certain political system.

The film *Tear Down and Rebuild* was shot in the former Palace of the Federation, the headquarters of the Federal Executive Council (the SIV) of SFR Yugoslavia. Today, the building is officially named the Palace of Serbia. The Federal Executive Council building was completed in 1961, when it hosted the First Summit of the Non-Aligned Movement. The Palace was among the first in a series of iconic buildings planned in the New Belgrade expansion, a modern neighbourhood which started to emerge after 1947 on a plot of land between the left bank of the Sava and the right bank of the Danube. This imposing building of great architectural and artistic value, intended to house the highest-ranking institutions of socialist Yugoslavia and preserved in its original condition, can be seen not only as the physical embodiment of political and social beliefs and policies at the time of its creation, but also as a place invested with symbolic significance, the birthplace of non-aligned globalisation, conceived in all its complexity, both materially and ideologically. The interior of the building was a visualisation of the 'representational'. The central room is a large meeting and conference hall, surrounded by six additional salons, intended to reflect symbolically the federal system of government.¹ The décor of each salon was intended to accentuate traditional ethnic motifs typical for the cultural heritage of that particular federal constituent. In this way, small individual units were created, *micromuseums* of nations and ethnicities, displaying artworks by local artists and craftsmen, but also showcasing local materials—wood, stone, etc.

The palace was erected at the time as a stage for national and emergent world politics; nowadays, within another temporal framework, it stands as a mute scene, devoid of its intended protagonists. This is precisely the stage on which Jasmina Cibic projects her ideological explorations in *Tear Down and Rebuild*.

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The SIV salons were named after the constituent republics: the Slovenian Salon, the Serbian Salon, the Croatian Salon, the Macedonian Salon, the Bosnian Salon and the Montenegrin Salon. Today the names of the republics have been replaced by the names of colours, such as the Brown Salon, the Blue Salon, etc.

The film raises the following question, which indirectly underscores the entire project: what happens to the politics of representation, both linguistic and visual, once it is recognised as an illustration of a certain ideology? Or, in other words, what happens to the products of an ideology once it is no longer functional? For Cibic, a broad field of exploration is to be found in 'the material remains' of historical and political artefacts, as well as artistic ones, in the remains that point indirectly to the circumstances in which they were designed and to their own function and purpose. As such, these remains also call for reconsideration of their contemporary presence and of their continued existence in different spatial, social, political and economic coordinates. *Tear Down and Rebuild* places an emphasis on text rather than architecture, although the architecture contributes to the narration and the overall content of the film as more than mere theatrical scenery.

The film features an all-female cast, who embody four ideological variations of Mother Nation: a Nation-Builder, a Pragmatist, a Conservationist and an Artist-Architect. The female characters serve as an extension of the featured architecture and artworks, emerging from the surrounding scene like sculptures—aestheticised, representative and theatrical in their performance, formally and ceremoniously complementing the empty stage. The dialogue which forms the basis of the narrative is an amalgam of various quotations, political speeches and statements (some of them dating back to the beginning of the twentieth century), advocating the repurposing of a certain object, the reconstruction or demolition of buildings that were no longer economically viable, with a view to establishing alternative architectural solutions which would be better suited to the current configuration of nation states and the attendant ideological standpoints.

The scenario of the film follows a seemingly linear narrative, formally belied by the classical Hegelian triad: thesis, antithesis and synthesis. The storyline presents each as a part of the political debate in three distinct spaces: the central conference room (an afternoon meeting), a dimly lit lobby (an ongoing evening / night-time debate) and one of the salons of the Republics (the morning resolution). As the narrative unfolds, the viewer becomes a witness to the decision to tear down a building, which in the course of the film remains unidentified. The facility in which the action takes place was neither mentioned in the conversation,

nor emphasised visually in the context of the story; thus it is implied that the building we see is not the field of interest, but a field of talk. It is offered as a possible new 'representative structure' out of which a ruling elite is acting and in relation to which it is developing a dominant political-aesthetic discourse.

The architecture of the interior frames the narrative like an organism, a silent participant; in other words, it aids in the creation of a setting necessary for a specific event, but it also produces imaginative content about the space in question. The heated debate the protagonists engage in concerning the fate of the (unspecified) building, arguing *in favour of* and *against* its existence, is subtly juxtaposed with the interior in which they are sitting. The building is thus revealed as a place of suspended identity, of unclear purpose, and ultimately of unclear fate in the context of the narrative. As such, it contributes to the creation of heightened tension in the film, to the gradation of unease. The building could be said to have the above-mentioned role of the fifth participant—the inactive, silently present one, the one that endows the entire event with a measure of suspense. In this regard, the architecture of the interior can be perceived as a subtext or context in relation to which the text / speech is constructed, reflecting on the inside all the stability and uncertainty, the authoritarianism and eeriness of the surrounding architecture.

The film can, therefore, be understood as a specific and deliberate construction of visual and textual content, of spatial as well as physical narrative. *Tear Down and Rebuild* is composed as a collage, reflecting the structure of the entire project. It is a rectified readymade, featuring independent segments of 'readymade' language, linguistic and spatial forms which are merged into a new, integral unit that performs the function of theatre.

In the previous two exhibitions, hosted at the Ludwig Museum in Budapest and at MGLC Ljubljana (which featured impressive spatial choices and installations), as well as in the first film in the trilogy (*The Nation Loves It*), the artist uses architectural and visual elements from the former SIV building as aesthetic and design templates. For the exhibition at the Ludwig Museum Budapest, a curtain was made with a pattern identical to the one found on the tapestry in the former Bosnian salon, titled *The Forest* and authored by Vojo Dimitrijević and Branko Subotić-Sube;

the protagonist in *The Nation Loves It* wears a shirt with the identical pattern; the exhibition *Give Expression to Common Desires* at MGLC Ljubljana featured a reproduction of the pastel-hued geometrical glass ceiling originally placed above the staircase in the SIV building. Cibic also installed it as the ceiling in one of her exhibition rooms. By appropriating such elements of visual arts and design from the interior, rooted in the original political and programmatic context of the SIV building, and by establishing new, unexpected, and even visually paradoxical associations, Cibic develops the notion of an ideological spectacle by including a wide range of artefacts, including non-utilitarian spatial objects which do not have a precise purpose besides their aesthetic and framing function. By merging and combining these into a large spatial system of representative elements, the artist seeks to provoke interest by reassessing their own political nature. In this way, she leads us into a broad field of the manipulative language of representation and propaganda. Each of the exhibitions can be seen as a uniquely designed mise-en-scène, which is further articulated through a new, different arrangement and interaction of displayed exhibits, with each subsequent reconfiguration providing additional layers of signification, but also by engaging with the viewer, both physically and sensorily.

Spielraum's chapters *The Nation Loves It* and *Give Expression to Common Desires* interact with each other, with the second exhibition stemming from the first, as much as both of them contain inklings of the third and final part *Tear Down and Rebuild*. In this way, the previous exhibitions can be understood as ur-narratives, announcements for what is to be fully developed or summarised in the final segment, especially in *Tear Down and Rebuild's* epilogue, where the *space of language*—the official rhetoric employed by politics and art—confronts the *language of space*—the grandiose and iconic setting of an existing building, which in this case can be seen as shaped by a specific political and economic apparatus. It is precisely such spatial and programmatic modularity that Cibic recognises as the essential potential of her project and the only possible way of approaching it as a whole.

Her third and final exhibition in the *Spielraum* trilogy, *Tear Down and Rebuild*, summarises all of the previously used references. However, the unique nature of the film, which uses its narrative as an explicit embodiment of the idea of utilising architecture as a political and ideological token, and juxtaposes the visual narrative (the interior) with the

textual narrative, allows Cibic to envision a new dimension of space. The film, as the focal point of the exhibition and the epilogue of the entire project, introduces a new spatial mise-en-scène, resulting in a new level of signification.

Cibic's exhibitions can be described as locations or scenes where an event is yet to happen. The final exhibition is no exception, since the artist seeks to create tension between the works through their layout and their implied context. In other words, she transforms the interior of the gallery with a special scenography, which is, much as it would be in a film, subtly invested with significance, through the association between represented, material objects as *facts*, and imagination, or *real time* fiction.

Technically speaking, Cibic employs the representational strategies used in her previous work. By montaging and blending her exhibits, she creates a large spatial collage that thematically relies on the material 'heritage' of political and ideological products, of pronouncements about architecture. In fact, much like in the film, different levels of action from abstract to concrete are put forward and interconnected—ranging from stage design to visual iconography, and including corporeal and performative acts. Here, however, they are more firmly placed within a deliberately chosen spatial construct, within the context of creating mysterious associations between different elements.

Upon entering the gallery, an element of architectural ironmongery was positioned on the left side, featuring the inscription "Draw back the curtain of the future". The object was suspended from the ceiling on two fine, almost transparent nylon filaments, slightly skewed, diagonally placed, which created the impression of a free-floating object in space. The circular typography hand-forged from iron alludes visually to the patterns found on steel fences and ornate gates leading into, but also closing off, the spaces of iconic buildings and premises.

The exhibition occupied the entire space of the gallery, but the layout created an impression of a space physically divided into two sections where all surfaces were (characteristically for the artist) treated by application of specific materials. A large and heavy curtain functioned as a screen, a room divider and simultaneously played the role of an exhibit itself. The two rooms could be described as a white room and a black box, designated for the projection of the film. The

entirety of the first room was covered in wallpaper, while the walls of the second room were draped in their entirety with black curtains.

The so-called white room, placed within this spatial layout, can be seen as a waiting room, a space that precedes the film projection, intended to foreshadow, visually and thematically, the content expressed more directly, using a different medium, in the film itself. The walls of this space were covered in their entirety in a black-and-white print of an imaginary landscape. This landscape was created by piecing together segments from authentic photographs of landscapes shot by official photographers working under Tito. In each of the exhibits and thematic units, the wallpaper was used and reworked in different ways. The display of the same *wall image* in different spaces indirectly provokes reconsiderations of the contextual uniqueness of a certain space, posing the question of whether that uniqueness is lost or enriched each time it is recast and displayed. The goal was to offer a sample of a representative landscape image, constructed especially for this occasion, from existing fragments never previously used in official presentation. The black-and-white landscape was constructed out of images the photographers made in passing, incidental to the official appearances they were employed to record. Such secondary perspectives engaged by Cibic suggest a reconsideration of the 'politics of image', of the way in which something is granted official status and representational value, and indirectly pose the question of how state-hired artists (in this case a photographer) act, which strategies direct their actions, what position they are accorded and what they are forced to surrender.

The image of the landscape was accompanied by quotations from various affirmative political speeches pertaining to architecture and construction, visually represented as inscriptions on banners, flags fluttering above the landscape, deposited on top of the trees and the shrubs.

The foregrounding of certain slogans and their meaning ("Display things beautifully"; "Renovate and relaunch"; "Faith without works is dead..."), along with the already-discussed exploration of the position of the artist, was subtly fused with a performance act carried out during the opening of the exhibition: a continuous gilding process of slogans incorporated within the landscape, executed by five female performers and lasting several hours. The five artists, all

dressed in minimal grey costumes, painted in the slogans on the wallpaper in gold paint, until all of the slogans were fully coloured in, all the while paying no attention to the audience. This performative act in which no beginning or end could be discerned, existing only as *in continuo* performance, contributed to the establishment of the artist's final *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Through the act of gilding, not only does Cibic animate the displayed content, but she also manages to construct a secret relationship between the space and the story, between the image (the visual) and the text, much like in the film.

One of the unique features of the performance is the fact that after it was completed, for the remainder of the exhibition, there lingered traces of the performed act's process: the ladder, the used paint and brushes. When confronting these traces, the spectator's gaze animates them, and the space itself is symbolically shaped into a narrative once again. The relationship established between the *traces* and the *remains* implies an active involvement through which the narrative is built and proliferated, rather than a mere active inventory of passive artefacts.

At the end of the exhibition room, a grey velvet curtain invitingly leads the viewer into the constructed cinematic space behind it: a completely dark room in which the film *Tear Down and Rebuild* was projected onto the entirety of the central wall. Designs for the furniture were once again drawn from archival sources of the design sheets for the urbanist infrastructure of the Conference of the Non-Aligned Movement in 1961 and manifested as a set of black triangular pedestals used to seat the audience, once again blurring spatial and fictive boundaries.

Cibic primarily seeks to establish whether there can be a *dialogue* between politically loaded objects from diverse historical or linguistic and media spaces, and how such a *silent dialogue* could be activated to produce new meaning. Physically, she manages to achieve this by live and recorded performance—partly owing to the fact that the objects she exhibits in the space are not original artefacts, but reconstructed and reshaped objects, neo-readymades purged of their original meaning and their identification. They are reduced to signifiers, which the artist utilises to build a new vocabulary that provokes a reconsideration of space and time, a clash of worlds—known and imaginary.

SPIELRAUM
CHAPTER 3:

TEAR DOWN AND REBUILD

Exhibition at
Salon of the Museum of Contemporary
Art, Belgrade
11 September 2015–25 September 2015
Curated by Una Popović

Exhibition at
Esker Foundation, Calgary
17 September 2016–17 December 2016
Curated by Naomi Potter

Exhibition at
the Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova,
Ljubljana, as part of *Low-Budget Utopias*
26 April 2016–25 October 2016
Curated by Bojana Piškur and
Zdenka Badovinac

