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on puppets and games

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Ksenia Aksenova

on puppets and games

MA essay

KHiO, Kunstakademiet i Oslo / Oslo National Academy of the Arts, The Academy of Fine Art



“For example, what do I see around me? I see that young artists in Russia, the Middle East, Asia, Africa, and Latin America want to say something, to speak about what worries and interests them and to pursue social change. Almost none are interested in a hermetic criticism and reflection on language itself, neither modernist nor postmodernist, and this obliviousness renders many of them naive. Some of them go to art school where, as some people think, they can be trained to speak the idiom of contemporary art. But even those young artists who do not study anywhere see this language art as a ready-made means of communication, one of many possible media, as an extant medium, and as a global post-Conceptual language. But who can hear what is said in this language? What place does this medium occupy among all the others?”

The above quote from a recent article “A Farewell to Totality” for e-flux by Gleb Napreenko, art critic, on “Formalism and Historicity” by Benjamin H. D. Buchloh¹ can bring us right into the middle of the subject I would like to question: on the choice of language, insisting on the choice made and its’ translation.

The realm of text, language and codes implemented in contemporary art multiplied by the intentions of the art projects or the audiences pursued—the potential that is used to change the common narrative and social structures—sometimes brings groundbreaking worldwide hits to the equation, however rather rarely. What could be those winning codes activating response from a wider public? Some forms of art, and here we should speak in a wider sense, have more presence and can reach larger audiences, i.e. feature films. Still, being a matter of trial and error, the perfect balance between the chosen medium and the language is sometimes a yellow brick road

¹ Gleb Napreenko “A Farewell to Totality”, translated from the Russian by Thomas Campbell, E-flux Journal #70, 02/2016
<http://www.e-flux.com/journal/a-farewell-to-totality/>

to Neverland. Art seeking more recognition and influence tends to travel and remake itself in new locations mimicking contemporalities, adapting forms and switching languages².

Funny Games³, for instance, (two films released in 1997 and 2007 by director Michael Haneke) are fundamental in understanding the workings of language of the medium, transferal, remake and translation of an idea, and its subsequent perception. As Catherine Wheatley states in “Michael Haneke’s Cinema: The Ethic of the Image (2009)”, Funny Games is “Haneke’s project of co-opting the spectator into a position of ethically engaged reflection”, which is many times the case with involved contemporary art projects and their goals.

In his interview to MovieMaker⁴ Michael Haneke answers why he did a shot-for-shot remake of Funny Games:

*“Well, the first film was made to reach an audience that consumes violence as entertainment... and that means it was made primarily for an American audience. Even the big country house in the original, you wouldn’t find something like that in Austria; it’s supposed to represent an American vacation house, built for a family. In any case, since the first movie is in German, it didn’t reach as large an audience as it might have here in the States. The film did well in the art houses, but that wasn’t the **audience that, shall we say, needed to see this**. So when [producer] Chris Coen approached me in Cannes and asked if I’d be interested in doing it, I told him I’d be glad to do it—on the condition that I could get Naomi Watts to play the lead. The film really was contingent on that. Since the message of the film hadn’t changed, I didn’t see any reason to change the aesthetics or dramaturgy.”*

To begin with, Haneke’s remake would not have happened without the American money. Question of financial support in large and ambitious art productions is always one of the most critical and influential. Secondly, Funny Games could be seen as a double translation. First addressed to the relatively nonexistent German-speaking American “audience that consumes violence as entertainment”⁵, Funny Games 1997 puppeteered the wrong crowd in the wrong period of time. Shot in Austria, Michael Haneke’s team scouted for a perfect lake house with

² Talking about translation, we should consider the notion in the expanded sense, on the level of concept as well as the literal definition.

³ IMDB categorized the 1997 version (108 min. Austria) as a *thriller* about how “two psychotic young men take a mother, father, and son hostage in their vacation cabin and force them to play sadistic “games” with one another for their own amusement”, whereas the 2007 remake (111 min. USA | France | UK | Austria | Germany | Italy) categorized as a *crime, drama, horror* got the following description: “two psychopathic young men take a family hostage in their cabin.”

⁴ “Michael Haneke Plays Funny Games With Naomi Watts”, by David Fear on March 13, 2008 for MovieMaker. <http://www.moviemaker.com/archives/moviemaking/directing/articles-directing/michael-haneke-funny-games-us-naomi-watts-20080313/>

⁵ ...or as Haneke calls all Hollywood productions or any non/art film, mainstream cinema by the term of “cinema of distraction” (le cinema de distraction, fr.).

golf amenities, trusted their image of an American idyllic scenery, transposed the common American thriller setting onto the Austrian ground, which Haneke obviously later turned into a puppet theatre with the viewer. Ten years later, after 9/11 and the now continuing war on terror, he produced a replica translated into American English, into an actual American landscape. Film production (and art production in general) is a work of many hands and minds, and in a way a process of trust. The 2007 version became even more a game of trust since this time the script was literally translated from German into English not by the director, but by a team of language specialists. Haneke trusted the all-American film crew, American film production rules, and had to operate and insist on delivering the “message of the film” unchanged. His 2007 release got extensive recognition but received even more mixed reviews and criticism of violence instrumentalization and “perversity”.

The received polarized reviews from a wider public pointed out to which extent the conditions of violence and morality are critical in society, whether they need representation, whether they are allowed to act out in unexpected ways, whether we are being in a constant “accomplice” state. The question is: in case of having an art project created locally and that is referring to glocal realities which are also socially critical and controversial, to what extent, if it is being translated/remade into another context (local culture, different parameters), does it have to carry a resemblance to the original. To what extent is it necessary to keep the formalities intact? Is it necessary to multiply projects? If you translate an idea into another language, how do you find the tools to measure the level of change that is brought by the change of language? How to compare the impact a final piece has on the viewer (in case it is important)? Most of these questions need empirical testing.

“Aesthetics of the work are precisely in the ethics of the work”⁶. This statement is relevant especially in regards to art dwelling on social practice, or collaborative projects involving the meeting point between artists and non-artists resulting in usually long-term cooperation addressing instrumentalization, criticality and socio-political landscape which usually demands the “ethically engaged reflection of the spectator”.

A potential example of this kind, a politically and socially-charged art project and its translation-remake, could be the puppet theatre-performance ‘Aphrodite’s Girdle’⁷, a joint work of artists and sex workers – a production based on narratives collected from of sex workers, where workers are personally contributing to the project. Although the project has not yet been remade, the questions it poses are relevant to the current perspective. Originally created in St. Petersburg in Lyuda Gallery on October 31, 2014, the project was developed in Russian language about the local context. Artists Vika Begalska and

⁶ In her Academy Lecture Nicole Smythe Johnson quoted Tanja Bruguera when mentioning her work *Immigrant Movement International*. Relevant article « An Artistic Response to the Refugee Crisis » <http://www.kunstkritikk.com/nyheter/an-artistic-response-to-the-refugee-crisis/?d=en>

⁷ <http://tereza24.wix.com/tereza#!poyas-afrodity/c1frd>

Aleksandr Vilkin during their art residency in Norway received an invitation to recreate a project in Oslo, but no guaranteed money support. In the Norwegian installment of the project this would become a collaboration with Pro Sentret⁸, me (Oslo-based Russian, English and Norwegian-speaking artist), and a number of people including protagonists themselves, social workers and many others. The Aphrodite's Girdle remake in Norway may become an intricate investigation of the current state of Norwegian society that would talk in many languages, unlike in Russia, have first-hand stories about the refugee crisis, police brutality, violence, locations, and vulnerability.



Aesthetics of the "Aphrodite's Girdle", Lyuda Gallery, October 31, 2014

In terms of public opinion in Russia, the project received recognition and response from art-related press, mostly positive⁹ than negative. In a review of the « Aphrodite's Girdle » the already mentioned in the beginning Gleb Napreenko¹⁰ stated that The Aphrodite's Girdle project was addressing and opposing the discursive invisibility of sex work in Russia, he also posed questions of necessity of such projects introduced in the context of an art gallery.

Original idea to recreate as closely as possible the structure already carried out in St. Petersburg however raises an array of practical questions. Is transposing of an original idea of the puppet show onto the Oslo ground as efficient? How long will it take to collect financing? Will the narratives of local protagonists play out as expected and how will the local public react to the performance? If choosing the art gallery setting, what kind of public will join? In the Russian context gallery space was if not the only arena for presenting the piece, as the subject matter in public is considered rather scandalous, and the use of a gallery as a tool levelled out the pending tension. As one of the objectives implies drawing attention of the public and mass media to sex workers' problems in Norway, will using a gallery space be enough

⁸ Note: Pro Sentret is the City of Oslo's service for women and men who sell sex, or who have sold sex in the past. The center is run by the City of Oslo.

⁹ Worth mentioning: in February 2015 the Aphrodite's Girdle performance was nominated by the National Centre for Contemporary Arts (NCCA) for the 'Innovation' award.

<http://www.ncca.ru/innovation/en/shortlist?contest=26&nom=1>

¹⁰ from colta.ru, a respected Russian on-line journal. 20 November 2014

<http://www.colta.ru/articles/art/5446#ad-image-0>

to draw in the needed audience? Will a project like this be considered scandalous (like “European Attraction Limited” in 2014 about “Norwegians' collective amnesia about racism”)¹¹, will it engage reflection or will it disappear unnoticed?

In his book *Funny Frames* Oliver Speck says, that “Funny Games, in both its incarnations, is foremost a scandalous film.” Regarding the question of being scandalous, is there a preconditioning to which projects gain the status of a scandal? In the same review on « Aphrodite's Girdle » for colta.ru Napreenko states: “Olympia” by Manet and Picasso's “Les Demoiselles d'Avignon”, the two main oeuvres of modernism dedicated to sex work, were scandalous precisely due to putting an equality sign between the viewer's gaze looking at the painting and the gaze of the brothel's customer or a client of an elite prostitute. They make the art consumer ask herself (himself): who is she, what is she looking for in art and in the object of sexual desire?”

It could well be that the language of scandal is the right way to go. But then again, whose rules are we using when activating the language of scandal and is it the constructive way to go. In Michel Cieutat's “50 films that created a scandal” he states that the goal of the Funny Games is to “denounce the often-used attraction for the staging of the spectacle of violence (la ‘mise en spectacle’ de la violence)”. So what happens if one is restaging a puppet show where puppets are the representation of the masters who in their turn are puppets of the sociopolitical change? And “what is the responsibility of the puppet master if the puppet perfectly imitates real life?”¹²

The last thing I would like to mention. In both 1997 and 2007 Funny Games the crucial scene with the rewinding of the rifle shooting Peter to death, Paul is grabbing a remote control. And in both cases the camera shows a close-up of it. Both times Paul presses the wrong button, i.e. not the rewind. Was that an intentional error to show the manipulation of the language of violence or was it an overlooked mistake? In some ways this doubt, this vulnerability of representation and dependence on trust is scandalous in itself. After all, who can hear what is said in this language?

¹¹ Norway's infamous ‘human zoo’ was a travesty in 1914. Here's why it was brought back in 2014 by Adam Taylor for Washington Post, May 23, 2014

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2014/05/23/norways-infamous-human-zoo-was-a-travesty-in-1914-heres-why-it-was-brought-back-in-2014/>

¹² From a set of questions Michael Haneke sent to his producer before beginning *Code Inconnu*, and after released in a press statement alongside the *Code Inconnu* film's release in 2000.