

Some considerations about Philoctetes Project

1. Conceptual introduction

According to Paul Virilio, since the 11S 2001 experience, world metropolis have become *panic metropolis*. This means that public space has been invaded by fear, insecurity and a permanent state of threat. The street passer-by experiments a decrease in his liberty, in both, individual and collective sense, and we all become suspects. We cannot be certain what we could suspected of, but truth appears to be that a certain kind of censorship, together with a self-censorship arouse on what one should or shouldn't do when in transit through public space. Hence, this urban space has ceased to be a metropolis or cosmopolis, in order to become a *claustropolis*. People's behavior sees itself limited (our physical features or attitudes might be considered suspicious) and even language has been censored (for instance, saying the word 'bomb' or 'terrorist' in an American airport might cost you detention).

Urban space has lost its public dimension and has transformed in yet another control area. In the fields of the arts, a kind of transfer of this political phenomenon has taken place. Within theater, galleries, museum walls, eveything is allowed. Outside, restriction. Something of an artistic amnesia has invaded societies, and experiences commonly visited during the 60s and 70s, are now seen as unstabilizing actions, not in aesthetic terms anymore but in political and even criminal terms.

From an artistic viewpoint, how far back should we step in public space? Who determines what one is allowed to do or not in a street? Why to accept restriction to our artistic freedom under the paralyzing speech of 'terror and security'?

And if art lets go, doesn't it becomes part of that control scheme, even unwillingly?

2. Project description

The title of the project relates to the myth of Philoctetes, the one with the rotten, stinking feet, confined to inhabit the isle of Lemnos, since his terrible smell makes him dreadful and unbearable to Greek society. All big urban territories are the contemporary Lemnos.

This urban intervention project can be performed in any city of the planet. It has already taken place in the cities of Vienna (Austria) in June 2002, Buenos Aires

(Argentina) in November 2002, and Berlin (Germany) in November 2004.

The project's concept is to interrogate in aesthetic terms the possible establishing links between the passer-by and the fallen body in the street. Also its potential consequences (indifference, rejection, sympathy, etc.)

An array of 25 hiper-realistic bodies (made in latex, all dressed up in real garments) are placed in 25 selected city locations. (The number of locations and dolls is actually up to the organizers, according their city's features.) The criteria for choosing the spots where bodies are to be placed, is defined according to a breakdown of specific geographical, historical and sybolic contents, as to the potential interaction with passers-by in those places. Then, the analysis leads to selecting, for instance, the doorstep of a public building, a popular park, a historical monument, a spot in a financial district, a chair in the city parliament, a train station, a museum, etc. The building of this criteria is part of the workshop.

The bodies are set in such a way that requires the unsuspecting audience to discover them. The lie postrated in the street, sleeping seated in a museum entrance, hanging from a tree, fallen on a bloodstain or vomit in a sidewalk, etc. Some will hide tape recorders that would produce weeping or quiet grieving sounds, etc.

The dolls are placed during the night in order for people to come across them from early next morning, at the beginning of the working day.

Production-wise, permits are requested in advance to the city authorities in order to frame this intervention within legal terms. Is vital to warn the police and emergency authorities of the experience.

Each of the placements is supervised by a team of three people (hidden from the audience's vision): one person is in charge of the technical or production aspects, to keep the the body in the arranged position, or reset it in case a passer-by, or policeman, etc. moves it. In addition to that, he manages the communication with the other teams, with the head of project and with authorities, in case of incidents, etc. Other two team members are in charge of the visual and audio registration (video, photography, sound recording of the passers-by's reactions, police intervention, comments, etc.) for the whole time the object remains in its place.

A total number of approximately 50 to 80 people are involved in the project.

The argentinean team is Emilio García Wehbi, creator and director of the Project, Maricel Alvarez, artistic producer and in charge of the media recording, Norberto Laino, set designer and doll creator, and Julieta Potenze, technical assistant.

The rest of the team is completed with local residents. Artists or students coming from different disciplines (actors, visual artists, photographers, video artists, producers, etc.) are invited to participate.

All the information the teams gather during the event (photos, videos, interviews, recording of incidents, etc.) is later analyzed within the workshop in collaboration with different artists and intellectuals. The result of this analysis, together with all the visual documents, is compiled and transcribed, in order to testify for the experience.

The video material is edited in video or DVD format for exhibition.

The event needs not to have any previous publicity. Only after it takes place, a public exhibition opens, where the experience is told and all moving and still visual material is shown.

3. On the Philoctetes Project

...those martirized bodies, that the SS couldn't even name: it is knowned through survivor's testimonies that under no circumstance they should be called "corpses" or "bodies", but simply Figuren, figures, dolls.

*What remains of Auswichtz.
Homo sacer III.*

Giorgio Agamben

The form crisis in contemporary art reaches further than what it consciously seems, even for the aware critic speech. Categories such as "politically correct" or "incorrect" are broadly used to label involvement procedures in the cities' cultural lives.

When the **Philoctetes Project** urban intervention takes place in a city, a part of the critical eye does not hesitate in

considering it a "politically incorrect" action, showing a reduced field according to their comprehension of conceptual and moral transgression in context of rupture of procedures and forms.

This project attempts to explore the crossroads where reality meets art, when art literally irrupts the ordinary space: the object is to interrogate in aesthetic terms, possible establishing links between the passer-by and a body lying in the city street, and possible consequences.

This is to say, the interrogation on the relationship between art and its environment.

The project seeks to explore the "suspicious normality" covering our late 20th and early 21st century cities; the rising of a new social landscape, in which the bodies of those who have fallen off the social-economical system are hidden away and exposed at once.

The intervention shifts the city to an immense stage when 25 hyperreal dressed up latex dolls irrupt in different locations. The motionless bodies stand at the same time on day-to-day real, social stage and, at the same time, on a poetical-fictional one.

The artistic devices that **Philoctetes Project** activates can be found at the interventionalist procedures and in the simulation nature of the latex dolls; these are the features that allow that narrowing of the borderline between reality and fiction, and the inter-crossing of the artistic event with the city's social network.

The shocking aspect of any action of intervention is produced when strange elements are introduced in a space, mostly when it deals with public space. The activating element of this intervention is focused at the dolls, that helped by their hyperrealistic nature -human sized, dressed as indigents, even made up to suggest scars or wounds that amplify their marginal condition- they generate astonishment and confusion in the passer-by.

The **Philoctetes Project** sits on the extremes of an artistic experience because of its apparent lack of 'poetic event', this, at least from the citizen's point of view, not being able to tell doll from person. Nevertheless, when passers-by do recognize the fictional bodies, the simulating instance vanishes and the objectual nature of the doll arises instead. The instant fiction is recognized, the 'poetical event' re-establishes and shifts passers-by into an audience condition.

One might consider the **Philoctetes Project** in relation to strategies used by what's known as 'invisible theatre', having as a starting point the situation where city walkers take for human the latex dolls, becoming unaware audience of an artistic situation. But 'invisible theatre' seeks to creating a 'concrete and true' situation, that once generated needs no longer the theatrical situation, meaning that when the audience becomes aware of what goes on, theatre fades out, recovering state of invisibility. In contrast, here the goal is not precisely the creation of an immediate discussion over what might be real or not; the participants do not operate as invisible actors, inviting passers-by to turn theatrical a real situation; here these participants work as discreet watchers/document recollectors out of a state of things that have to take over the people's reactions when they discover that the bodies in question are in fact, dolls; when this happens, the invisible theatre feature becomes explicit and the interventors play their parts, not as actors but as assistants / witnesses / document collectors of the artistic action, in the complex border between art and social reality.

In *Philoctetes* the access to the theatrical or fictional procedure is not closed; the invisible borderline between poetical event and ordinary life is not strictly kept: when the fact that they are dolls, not real people, is discovered, it reveals a poetic instance that brings an ambiguous and extreme artistic event out of the intervention. In any case, the possible actors are the same passers-by that behave as participating performers before recognizing the doll; but once that happens and the artistic intervention appears to sight, they shift to an aware audience condition, situation that detonates a variety of discussions and uncomforness in many of the citizens involved.

The **Philoctetes** experience seeks to observe the relationship between two extremes of the social structure, using art as intervention tool. Although it all begins with a simulation of the artistic object appearing to be 'real' social body, the main interest is set in observing the links that transiting people establish with the doll, inciding in their urban behavior. All these ambiguous relations between passers-by and dolls, between ordinary life and fictional reality, life's dramatic side and artistic ellaboration, take place in borderline grounds. **Philoctetes** is built precisely on this space, like a kind of 'interstitial landscape', a 'connective tissue' between the spaces of the real and the artistic, seeing itself

amplified as it takes place in public, open spaces of the city.

Yet another difference with the practice of "invisible theatre" is the fact that the **Philoctetes** team notifies the corresponding authorities of the action in advance, in order for the police, ambulance service and other civil instances to be warned on what is going to happen, so that they don't get caught by surprise. The action field then, is not the large city social structure, but their inhabitants relational space; its goal is to operate a more personal approach to the citizen's way of looking.

The use of dolls in **Philoctetes** means another big difference with "invisible theatre". The 25 dressed-up latex figures are nothing but an imitation of the human being, and like Tadeusz Kantor's maniquins, carry their own death within. Beyond any meaning or interpretation, these dolls are objects whose real inert bodies expose an 'objectualization' of death; mostly when exhibited in ordinary transit space, invading the privacy of the passer-by: in the unconfortness, in their condition of not belonging, they become obscene bodies, unveiling the comfort of ordinary indifference. These maniquins, real body-doubles, emerge as symbolic figuration of the social drama.

In this 'reality theatre' the irruption comes from art directed to the social body. The result of this is a social provocation by art: the ordinary indifference towards *real* bodies in the streets, is detonated by their non-moving replicas: *the more the dolls look like us, the more disturbing they get*. This poetic strategy, this fiction, detonates the rising of a new reality that seem to be erasing day by day: *the doll in the street operates revulsively, in such a way that leaves in evidence what occurs on daily basis*.

As one looks at the images collected during the event, the covered urban violence residing in the complex social body of the *polis* unfolds; what also detonates here is the political feature of an art that seeks not to remain a *theme*, but to be looked for in the structures that brings to sight, in the mechanisms and practices that exposes.

The **Philoctetes Project** is aesthetically hybrid in its way of making its own apropiation of interventionist and performative strategies, of disturbing 'actionism' practices, of object theatre and of *happenings*. It takes side for the ephimere and -although transcendent in social impact terms- mutable action, and activates critical

reflection beyond any aesthetic framing. The **Philoctetes Project** is overall, an event revealing the complex metaphors that contemporary political art operates with.

4. Some considerations.

Taking into consideration the three previous experiences of this project held in different cities (Vienna, Buenos Aires, Berlin) we can now start identifying the action lines - in artistic terms - upon which this project operates:

On one hand, the Philoctetes Project works as an autonomous artistic project that recognizes its aesthetic influences in the performances held during the 60s and 70s, mainly in relation to the **situacionism** movements, in which temporary situations in a specific context were built with the intention of producing a high degree of passion or social intensity.

The change in the historical context (the beginning of the new millennium) and the presence of social control commanded by the State and the groups in Power (read the media), together with the absence of utopia, make this Philoctetes Project a complex and polemic artistic piece.

Considering this, we are able to identify the following different topics

-the work with the complete team of the project, from the local organizers to the members of the original artistic team and the participants (between 60 and 80 people) produces a profound discussion within the group, a very intense interchange of opinions and considerations, not only regarding the aesthetic aspects of the project but also in relation to the general context; the concept of public and private space, social control, the role of the media as "opinion builder", the role of art in post modern times, questions regarding the limits of what's ethical and moral, etc.

The project deals with the limit, a borderline of art in regards to the public space. Under what excuses is it licit to produce or place art in public space? Who determines the ethical or moral criteria to allow art to public space? The idea of "good taste"? The concept of "political correction"? The concept of "danger"?

The project unveils the State's mechanisms of power, specially regarding burocratic procedures. In each city,

Vienna, Buenos Aires and Berlin, the producers notified the local authorities with exact detail the list of locations where the puppets were going to be placed. The heads of the security system, as well as the chiefs of the firemen department and medical emergency assistance services were also notified. The main purpose of this notifications was to prevent and avoid any kind of chaos or conflicts, due to unnecessary attendance of police units or ambulances to the chosen locations. In all the three cities, the information never reached the lower levels of the institutions mentioned, so police units and ambulances arrived to the locations with no information whatsoever of what was going on.

Within the information system of the power's structure, the information we provide gets somehow blocked and the chain gets broken. Is the basic principle of bureaucracy: disinformation.

The project appears as politically incorrect before the eyes of the social body, since it mingles with the concept of obscenity (what's kept out of scene, what a society considers undesirable to sight, denying it), in this case death. The dead body or the fallen body of the puppet in the public space provokes a **memento mori** (an evocation of death) in the passer by -that through this secret irruption in the public space becomes an actor. The topic of death is obviously a taboo in most societies and its artistic treatment is only accepted in a highly metaphoric way. Therefore Philoctetes Project is rejected, because it disguises metaphor in order to bring it closer to reality.

Concerning the power procedures through information (the passer-by doesn't know, for a moment, that the laying body is merely a puppet, opposed to the organizers that do know), the Philoctetes Project works as a mirror, operating for an instant those procedures of power as method to show the way knowledge and / or information can be manipulated. But does that only as an example. Once the the passer-by's first impact before the fallen body passes, the member of the group in charge of that location approaches the person in order to explain that it's only an object lying and that it's part of an artistic experience that it's being simultaneously presented in different places in the city. So, in that moment, the information and the experience itself, returns to democratic terms, becomes wider, since the person is also invited to participate in the upcoming public debates, to freely speak his or her mind towards the project and its consequences.

The reaction of the press towards the project is quite peculiar; it remarks its importance, mentioning it in the

newspapers, but does so within the Police or Society sections, never in the Art section. This is naturally a way of disqualifying the project. At the same time the media tends to exaggerate information, inventing or increasing pieces of information such as the amount of times police units attended the locations, same with ambulances, etc. Therefore, we can say that Philoctetes Project also nudes the power mechanisms of the media in relation to the making up or tergiversating information.

For all the above mentioned, the project creates two possible circles of reflection: the first among organizers and participants, and the second among the audience itself (the pedestrians) that plays the part of the object and subject of this experience at the same time and that takes active part in its debate.

One unforeseen consequence of the project is that operates, in a certain way, as an efficiency test for the emergency systems of the city. At the same time it also works as a thermometer of the social humour and mood.