

In Irena Lagator Pejović: *Società a responsabilità limitata (S.r.l.) / Limited Responsibility Society (L.L.C.)* Edited/Curated by Ilaria Mariotti. Published by: VILLA PACCHIANI, SANTA CROCE

Ilaria Mariotti

## Means for intensifying a sense of poetic reconstruction of the world

The equation whose result is a simple “NON” sums up - perhaps in a rather unpleasant way, but with exceptional visual impact - Irena Lagator Pejović’s exhibition and her recent musings. The show traces a path through language, through the superficiality of individuals’ taking for granted the sum total of collective processes, and through a contemporary society managed and regulated first and foremost by economic processes (how sadly true this is of Italy today!).

It is only a few days ago that in the last of a series of interviews, Salvatore Settis<sup>1</sup>, the eminent archaeologist and art historian, addressed the need to define, and insist upon, the horizons of citizens rights, disrupted, as they have been, by the true crisis: the pursuit of constitutional statutes has been annulled by the will of the markets, which are as antidemocratic and anti-political as any entities in existence.

Health, education, culture, these are rights, rights which have nevertheless been trodden upon in a reckless - though purportedly necessary - series of across-the board funding cuts afflicted on a country that has seemingly decided - for the moment, given the current ‘crisis’ - not to invest in research and education.

Irena Lagator Pejović lives in Montenegro, a country within the ethnically and politically disparate Balkans, which looks to the Mediterranean area and Central Europe, while contemporaneously still hearing the echoes of the Ottoman Empire that has determined so much of its history and culture. Irena lives in land very different from Italy: a country of about 670,000 inhabitants, where the predominant religion is Eastern Orthodox Catholicism. Historically, Montenegro has had close ties with Italy: it was a kingdom under the Italian protectorate, and Elena of Montenegro became Queen of Italy in 1896. In 2003 it united with Serbia in an attempted continuance of the Yugoslav Federation, after the Federal Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia fell apart in 1992. Finally, on June 3, 2006 it became an independent republic following a popular referendum.

Irena’s artistic research addresses day-to-day matters, drawing inspiration from landscapes, real estate speculation, people’s desires and expectations, the economy and

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<sup>1</sup> *Che tempo che fa*, December 3, 2012, Fabio Fazio converses with Minister Francesco Profumo and Salvatore Settis. See: <http://www.rai.tv/dl/RaiTV/programmi/media/ContentItem-2a8134d2-8565-4f18-8def-0c94dcc518b9.html#p=>

human value systems. Hers is a broad-ranging endeavour that continually poses questions regarding both personal and collective responsibilities within a framework of sustainability, that is however not individualistic, as it bears on issues of common interest affecting all our lives in a universal dimension (albeit modulated in terms of individual specificities).

In artist creation, there is ever the need 'to make questions visible', to present shared social and civil reflections in an 'acquired' form that is at once poetic and ecological, political and social, that exists in a system of relationships with people who perceive, recognize and interact with the objects set out before them in public and private spaces, in museums and cityscapes, and which are and remain the *Res publica*, public 'things'. Irena's artistic enquiry is based on historical questions and the concrete facts of collective daily life that have enormous bearing on individuality: on the administrative, public, environmental and cultural matters that tie people together in a single 'civil society', and enable this whole, made up of single individuals, to equip itself with common objectives and laws. Her work thus regards general, rather than particularised matters, and spans a wide range of rights that, as mentioned at the outset, are absolute and demandable the world over.

One important characteristic of Irena Lagator Pejović's creations is that they are environmental, that is, they aim to construct places where the process of sharing takes time. Her work seeks to spur viewers on, inviting them to walk through a space, get in touch with it (physically) and participate in processes that time and time again alter the values and the meanings it conveys.

Thus, at Villa Pacchiani, Irena Lagator Pejović has constructed a path that, starting with the assumption that contemporary society is governed by laws and conventions that largely regard the economy, attempts to create some devices by which numerical and economic data are made less trenchant, in conventional terms, while leaving room for reflection upon the aspirations and creative ability of the human mind.

It is a path through time that is travelled when crossing the installation *Limited Responsibility Society, Santa Croce sull'Arno*: a city made up of over a thousand rolls of till receipts from a local supermarket - documents that highlight the imposing consumption of material goods in even a small city such as Santa Croce sull'Arno.

They bring to vivid, visual life the material needs of families, firms, and individuals, recording their every purchase of goods. However, the photosensitive paper, that is, not printed with ink, is destined to fade in time, a fact that adds a slightly melancholy note to the quantity of paper, expense, time, and daily life this city dedicates to consumption and things.

The work, *Knowledge of the Limited Responsibility Society* gathers up receipts from all over the world and arranges them in books at the complete disposal of the public, who are free to peruse them. Arranged according to length (and therefore the quantity of goods purchased), they were either collected during the artist's travels or sent by friends. Upon reading the product names in the books, many, purchased in different parts of the world, are the same, a fact attributable to consumption patterns, the global circulation of goods, questions of import-export, and so forth. Every receipt bears the date of issue and

the company name: S.r.l. (i.e. limited liability company) is one of the most frequent. As we all know, S.r.l. (or variously **L.L.C.** and **Ltd.** in English) is a term coined by the world of economics and commercial law and designates a company in which each partner's rights (and responsibilities) are proportional to his/her stake in the company. The various works making up this exhibition are centred on how this wording, and its underlying concept of limited liability (and more in general, responsibility, as the Italian denotes), has been taken out of its original economic and legal context and applied more generally to society as a whole.

The artist's reflection on the need to take responsibility is summed up in the equation whose negative result (Non) is nonetheless charged with positive value and hence represents a negation asserting the need for, and the possibility of, redemption (*Equation Function*). Flanking the formula are documents establishing, and then, three and a half months later, closing down a real firm, an S.r.l. set up by the artist, by the name of S.r. NON I. This desire to try out the bureaucratic procedure necessary to set up a company with certain characteristics, to create a real economic instrument - which incidentally was rejected as unsuitable for reasons related to the idea of limitations to responsibility - is a practice that Irena Lagator Pejović frequently follows in her work. It highlights the need to become aware of facts, situations and words that the force of habit has rendered indistinct, barely meaningful: it serves to alert our consciousness to the risk of blindly accepting stereotypes and customs.

*Limited Responsibility Society Automatism* is the third work on display that makes use of receipts: long columns of till receipts hanging from rolls on the ceiling are progressively unfurled by visitors, almost like the columns of some architectural structure in progressive decay (perhaps part of the city in the first room?). The receipts, however, are full of immaterial items, interlopers that no one would expect to have to pay for, such as love, friendship, sentiment, memory - all in a register that normally records the price of tomatoes, milk, bread, and parsley. The already read rolls accumulate willy-nilly on the floor, progressively filling up the room in a jumble. The items, prices and totals follow one after the other, each item repeated innumerable times, in a sort of compositional automatism (which amounts to a sort of craving or compulsion to acquire) of immaterial values and which, even on paper, constitute a sort of aesthetic display, a 'form' of acquisition, but also of craving and need.

Craving and need are what seem to animate the multitude of minuscule human beings in a state of agitation on the 28 sheets making up this particular installation: *The Society of Pacific Co-existence*. For the Villa Pacchiani exhibition we decided to install the work on the floor and multiply the number of sheets composing it to create an expanse in which the pattern fades away into a sort of indefinite swarm, with light shading teeming with signs. Each of the multitudinous figures is contained within individual squares in a grid pattern. Each claims its own space; each is free to move within that space. What kind of space or aggregation can make such co-existence possible? What can be accomplished in such a space? What manner of politics is practised in this society? Is pacific co-existence even possible?

How and by what actions are we building the collectivity? What constitutes the collectivity today? How does communication contribute to the de-formation of society

and space?

The prints have been made using the technique of algraphy, a process similar to lithography, but using aluminium as the support. As applied here, the technique is particularly well-suited to the content, given that it allows for reproducibility. The number of figures making up this society has become legion, by no means easy to quantify. The notebook, with pencilled drawings on each page, contains the same drawing, though with slight changes. Thus, flipping through the pages provides variations on the original subject (*The Society of Unlimited Responsibility*).

*All the spaces are the same size. All of their bodies are identical in shape. Their plurality creates the society. Their society creates individuals. As a collective, in their silent co-presence, they move without bounds, individually and reciprocally, because they are beings of the UN-limited responsibility society. To produce what? To obtain what? The process of creating the book has been a very long one: I drew the figures one by one, page by page. Only equilibrium based upon awareness of the multitude enables pacific social co-existence, thereby making possible the accomplishment of its work, creation, development and democracy.*

*These 'people' provide an example of how space, divided amongst different cultures, peoples, nations, religions, languages, and epochs, becomes a boundless co-residence. These men are all echoes of each other. They are motivated by an ethical imperative. The men of this society are Nietzschean, in the sense that their evolution is ongoing. The inhabitants of this type of society do not share space alone; they share their own destiny, wisdom and experience. They identify with the concept and practice of UN-limited responsibility.*

*The form of the artist's book is at the same time a metaphor of human wisdom, but it prompts us to reflect on the origins of wisdom, experience and memory of the society.*  
(the artist's words)

The work *Installation for Improving the Sense of Responsibility* is made up of series of Serbian banknotes bearing the portrait of the renowned scientist Nikola Tesla (1856-1943). A Serb and naturalized American citizen, Tesla's studies laid the bases for alternating-current electrical systems. The banknotes are arranged to build a sort of small room: the banknotes are, of course, a convention, but they communicate universal values of research and development, of accepting responsibility for society. The space delimited by the banknotes is offered up as an area for reflection, for listening to one's own cravings, in a place where the creativity and talent of a single individual have proved fundamental for inventions that have benefitted the whole of humankind. Here, talent and creativity are at the service of practical achievement. But our attention is drawn, as well, by the beauty of some of Tesla's own designs printed on the banknotes, by the quality of the designs themselves.

In an article published in the February 22, 2011 edition of the newspaper *La Repubblica*, the philosopher Maurizio Ferraris presented the book by Martha Nussbaum entitled *Non-profit. Why democracies need the humanities*<sup>2</sup>. He begins with

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<sup>2</sup> Maurizio Ferraris, *Martha Nussbaum*, the complete article can be found at: <http://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2011/02/22/marthanussbaum>.

these words<sup>3</sup>:

*Barack Obama, though convinced that money spent on education is money saved on police and welfare, has recently expressed his praise of East-Asian countries: "They are spending less time teaching things that don't matter, and more time teaching things that do. They are preparing their students not only for high school or university, but for a career. We are not". So education is evidently conceived as preparation for a career and for profit, not for humanity.*

Some excerpts of correspondence with the American philosopher in relation to the presentation of his book serve as further food for thought.

*The first (of the fundamental requirements of his design) is the Socratic activity of stimulating every person's capacity for self-contemplation and self-clarification, to favour a more reflective, contemplative public culture, in which each of us is less influenced than nowadays by others, by authority and fashion. The second is the ability to think as 'citizens of the world', with adequate knowledge of world history, the global economy, and the world's major religions. The third is to cultivate sympathetic imagination. Even as children, human beings are already able to empathise with others and their positions, but this ability needs to be developed if citizens are to be rendered capable of thinking outside their narrow circle and putting themselves in the positions of people who are very different from them. A democracy cannot endure long without these three capacities.*

*And we cannot assume that they will magically appear out of thin air, without deliberately cultivating them through education.*

Thus, the emphasis is on disinterested knowledge, on responsibility – including political and economic - and on education that is able to produce thinking citizens by imparting the crucial instruments for reflecting upon the world and the meaning of things, and that does not adhere to passing fashions or stereotypes, but is the fruit of conscious deliberation and development.

An unlimitedly responsible society in thought and action; a set of unique individuals able to appraise weaknesses and fragility, risks and criticality, these latter also being evaluated creatively and effectively in a sharing of the NON in the formula that becomes a YES - an affirmative that stems from a negation, and from awareness.

The last room of the exhibition contains the eighteen glass spheres that compose the installation entitled *Means for Intensifying a Sense of Poetic Reconstruction of the World*.

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<sup>3</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Non per profitto. Perché le democrazie hanno bisogno della cultura umanistica (Non-profit. Why democracies need the humanities)*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2011, with preface by Tullio De Mauro.

The work was inspired by the trilogy “Spheres”, by the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, in which “spaces of co-existence” and technological discoveries create a hybrid reality. Sloterdijk reflects on the expansion of the world and the poetics of the plural (represented by foam bubbles, whereas here it is evoked by the spheres) with a proposal to create an “ontological constitution” that includes all beings - humans, animals, plants and machines. Upon closer inspection, and depending on the vantage point, the spheres reveal patterns that change according to the precise viewing angle. They are worlds, and at the same time, fragile glass balls, brilliant and evanescent in the light. Their fragility evokes the ephemeral beauty of Sloterdijk’s foam bubbles. They call upon us to look closer, but they demand a cautious approach, taking care not to bump into them.

While viewing the spheres someone asked Irena if they could walk around them. She replied: “It depends on your sense of responsibility”.

