

In: Irena Lagator Pejović: *Image Think*. Montenegrin Pavilion at the 55<sup>th</sup> International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia. Curated by Nataša Nikčević.

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## Image horizons and presence

For Henri Lefebvre, spaces represented *great movements, endless rhythms, giant waves - interfering ones with the others*. Space is not a dead, inert thing or object, but an organic, living space which has its own pulse. Lefebvre's unitary theory of space explains the relations between the different spatial domains: *physical* space (nature), *mental* space (formal abstractions about space) and *social* space (the space of human interaction)<sup>1</sup>. The poetics of space of the Montenegrin artist Irena Lagator Pejović can be best described as an interweaving of Bachelard's poetics of space, Greene's elegant universe and Lefebvre's conception of space and society as relational and non-Euclidean geometry.

The artist's oeuvre can be classified according to its relation to space. One line of artistic inquiry is represented by those works that comment on and/or criticize spatial devastation, both urban and natural. The works in the second group are characterized by a tighter bond between the viewer's perceptions, which are no longer exclusively visual, and space. The artist examines perception, introducing the role of the body as the creator of space as the medium for its understanding, i.e. interactivity as the main element in the artwork, time as a category analyzing the notion of artwork – paramount ideas in her discourse. The third and most complex group is represented by spatial constructions whose elementary building material is cotton string. These filaments exist between the material and the immaterial, while in terms of space, they can be read as the construction of new, personal spaces<sup>2</sup>, which can be defined in terms of Foucault's *heterotopia* as places of concurrence of heterogeneous contents and spaces.

Beginning with the scientific discoveries of light as wave motion, spectrum theory and the fact that throughout the history of art light has been considered the basic condition of painting as a medium, Irena Lagator Pejović introduces the triad of light, time and the viewer's perceptions (visual and tactile) in site-specific spaces created out of strings. Light becomes the constructional element of the artwork. Depending on the intensity, the work appears and disappears, denoting the states of presence and absence. The site-specific installations *Please Wait Here* (2005) in the Pisa Basilica of San Zeno, and *Own Space* (2006) in the Neue Galerie Graz were constructed with strings in all the colors of the rainbow, their hues varying according to the light source and the viewers' movements and perceptions. Temporality and interactivity are the initial features of these installations, whereas shimmering silver and golden strings were used for the first time in the installation *Living Room* (2006), in the Art Pavilion in Podgorica.

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<sup>1</sup> Andy Merrifield, *Henri Lefebvre: A Critical Introduction*, Routledge, New York, 2006, 104.

<sup>2</sup> On the nature of the relationships of Irena Lagator Pejović's work to space, and the similarities with architecture, see Milica Topalovic's *Art as Architecture in the Work of Irena Lagator*, in: *Irena Lagator Pejović: The Society of Unlimited Responsibility. Art as Social Strategy. 2001-2011*. Edited by Christa Steinle, Karin Buol-Wischenau, Neue Galerie Graz am Universalmuseum Joanneum. Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Köln, 2012, 18.

Many artists have used string in their installations to focus on the theme of individual and collective spaces – the differences between them, as well as the perceptions of the viewer, take for example, Fred Sandback, Gertrude Goldshmidt (Gego) and Jesus Soto. The closest analogies can be established with Soto's series *Penetrables*, in which geometric spatial constructions enclose the viewers, sucking them in, and leading them to question the space they occupy, as well as those spaces they can own. Nevertheless, while the Venezuelan artist uses heavy, opaque plastic and metal wires, whose thick vibrating mass appears to cancel out the materiality of the viewers' bodies, Irena Lagator Pejovic constructs her spaces with delicate strings that react to the slightest changes in light, air vibrations or the visitor's movements. It is not the body, but the work of art that she chooses to dematerialize, referring nonetheless to the traditions of conceptual art.

These fleeting, ephemeral spatial constructions, which you can walk through, belong to, modify, represent the artist's question of whether we (intended as a multitude) are indeed able to construct reality (and in which case, how), or whether it is the reality that constructs us.

In *Further than Beyond*, two golden tetrahedra of monumental dimensions are placed at different heights, one in front of the other, dividing the space and creating a symbolic entrance – an overture to the project *Image Think*, created for the 2013 *Biennale di Venezia*. The *bodies* of the tetrahedra are made of horizontally arranged cotton strings, which refer to the theory of parallels, the distinctive concepts of Euclidean and non-Euclidean geometries. While Euclidean geometry implies only three dimensions, non-Euclidean geometry has  $N$  number of dimensions: nothing in it is ever repeated and, due to the limitations of our senses, it can never be adequately experienced. The golden strands in the installation *Further than Beyond* are the material *equivalent* of light, while their horizontal arrangement implies scientific understanding of the wave motion of light. String, at the very core of Irena Lagator Pejović's artistic expression, is related to Brian Greene's recent theories of space: "Superstring theory unites the laws of the small and the large, laws that govern physics out to the farthest reaches of the cosmos and down to the smallest speck of matter"<sup>3</sup>. The unique, harmonious whole constituted by the world and the universe matches the asymptotically vibrating strings. The taxonomy of these theories is at the same time a reflection on the ways in which knowledge has influenced the shaping of mental images and the works of Irena Lagator Pejović.

In *Further than Beyond*, the dominant, floating golden tetrahedra evoke the notion of the icon, whose function in Byzantine art is accurately described by the art critic Dejan Sretenović as the medium which structures the collective memory, consciousness and knowledge. Parallels with Byzantine icons can also be drawn by virtue of their distinctive exteriorization of inner light, represented by the gold background, because "light in Byzantine iconography does not arrive from an outer source, but manifests itself within the boundaries of the image (screen effect)"<sup>4</sup>. Through the interplay of light and the interaction between the *bodies* of the golden tetrahedra and the *bodies* of the visitors, Irena Lagator Pejovic aims to overcome the stasis of shapes and the density and opacity of matter, in order to avoid passive observation and encourage the development of a chain of imagination and signification. The iconic markings emphasize the issues of their influence in shaping our experience of the world throughout the centuries, for instance in the context of the iconoclastic debates in

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<sup>3</sup> Brian Greene, *The Elegant Universe*, Norton, New York, 2003, xii.

<sup>4</sup> *Novo čitanje ikone. Zbornik tekstova*, edited by Dejan Sretenović, Geopoetika, Beograd, 1999, 7.

Byzantium, conducted on the semiological level, amongst others, concerning the relation between an image and its referent.

One of the essential points of string-defined spaces is how the material implies the immaterial. A retrospective look reveals that in her previous spatial constructions the artist had, at first, used strings in all colors of the spectrum, followed by the interference of silver and golden strands, always hung vertically from the ceiling. The string connotes time with levity, fragility, and the possibility for interruption and continuation. Two important turning points can be detected in the conception and formalization of the artist's work: in *Further than Beyond*, for the first time she uses exclusively golden strands and for the first time she arranges them horizontally. The insistence on horizontality stems from non-Euclidean geometry and the wave motion of light, but it can also be explained by the multiple meanings of the word *horizon*. It is the dividing line between the end of the Earth's surface and the start of the sky – the Universe, but *horizon* can also denote the limits of the mental perceptions, experiences and interests of each individual. In light of Barthes' suggestion that the linguistic message accompanying an image can further anchor its meaning, an analysis of the title *Further than Beyond* of the first, golden chamber, can act as the basis for the process of its determination. The adverbial clause making up the title points directly at the categories of space (all string works refer to space) and time in its limitlessness, but also to the concept of value, because gold has been considered the most precious of metals in all cultures and civilizations, a symbol of light, divinity and absolute perfection. The golden strands are also a specific homage to the city of Venice, to its golden domes, palaces and paintings.

In the artist's opinion, thoughts, experiences and senses constitute a triad through which we perceive the world. Knowing this, it becomes easier to understand her insistence on the (co)operation between artist and viewer, by which the latter becomes an accomplice to the work of art. Irena Lagator Pejovic introduces the concept of imagination, a *conditio sine qua non* for both the creation of art and its reception, shaped by our thoughts, experiences and senses. In her previous string works, she suggested that visitors walk through them to the interior of the artwork to be enveloped by these delicate creations. Depending on the light, the walls were deconstructed, and the strings disappeared visually. Now, however, there is no passage through the artworks' material, there is no inevitable enclosure by the image – the tactile effect is the visitor's choice and responsibility. The memory of the image, perceived and perhaps touched in this way, continues to oscillate between the inner and outer worlds of the image. The aura of authenticity, sublimity and cult value, which according to Walter Benjamin characterize works of art as such, mark the perception and the memory of the passage through the work *Further than Beyond*. Despite the juxtaposition of opposing categories empty/full, light/dark, visible/invisible, their boundaries are not sharply defined, but soft, diffuse, mobile. Instead of conflict, the work imparts an image of contemplation, balance and art as equilibrium.

As argued by Hans Belting in his study of the anthropology of images, an image may live in a work of art, but the image does not necessarily coincide with the work of art<sup>5</sup>. Where, and how, does the image exist in the work *Image Think* (constituted also by the artist's intervention in the catalogue *Camera Imaginata*), with respect to the body and the medium? Exiting *Further than Beyond*, you find yourself in the space of the interactive installation *Image Think*: the ceiling and walls of the constructed rectangular

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<sup>5</sup> Hans Belting, *An Anthropology of Images. Picture, medium, body*, Princeton University Press, Princeton & Oxford, 2011, 2.

black polyethylene entity are perforated by needles of different gauges, creating passages for light. The entrance into dark spaces is inscribed in our memory as the domain of anticipation and uncertainty. The pupils widen, the body becomes the focus of our perceptions, until the gradual breakthrough of light reveals the images of the artificial cosmos. The space grows, becomes larger, and we see the reflected images of astral vortices. We create individual images of the universe, perceived ambiguously: the cosmos is near, yet far, boundless. The images change, affected by the visitors' movements and the time spent inside the work. They migrate between our perception, imagination, memory and thought – we start to think of the image in images. The floating tetrahedron in the work *Further than Beyond* rotates in a simulation of the state of weightlessness of a person entering the unlimited, where we project our personal cosmologies, the relationships between the self and the universe, the subjective and the collective.

We become aware that the mirrors on the floor of the installation multiply this universe. The mirror is an object that marks our everyday lives, but which has been investigated throughout history in philosophy, literature, and art as the location of the symbolic intersection between reality and illusion: Socrates, Aristotle, Kierkegaard, Foucault, Freud, Lacan, Borges, Mallarmé, Valéry, Jan Van Eyck, Leonardo, Velasquez, Pistoletto. Even such a fragmentary look recalls the *encyclopedic* as a characteristic of the mirror, about which a great body of knowledge has been gathered and reflected upon in mankind's attempt to understand the universe. The word *speculation*, from Latin *speculum* "mirror", was originally used to indicate the contemplation of the sky and astral movements with the aid of a mirror, while *reflection* referred both to the physical phenomenon caused by a mirror and deep thought. Our steps in the cosmos, audible by chance, are our path inside the imaginary. In the work *Image Think*, a triangle is inscribed between the body, the medium and the images, both the inner and the outer ones.

Reflecting the multiplied images of the cosmos, the mirror does not show our faces, only silhouettes, perhaps the shape of Baudrillard's double, the one that pervades our entire culture. If the entrance to the universe, reflected in the mirror, denotes the exit from ourselves, then the (im)possibility of mirroring, of self-perception, is a delicate signalization of contradiction and an aporia. Irena Lagator Pejović asks: by what kind of images do we shape our knowledge, and to what extent can personal imaginary participate in such process?

In the *Hall of Mirrors* of the Neue Galerie Graz in 2006 she put on a performance without audience that later became a video – *Man or Star*. She chose a space multiplied by mirrors, in which she, dressed completely in black, executed cartwheels. The reflection of the body registered only as an outline is further developed as a concept in the installation *Image Think*, while the moving figure which *draws* stars in space becomes, like a pictogram, the building block for a more harmonious coexistence.

In the labyrinths of reality in which we live, the uncertainties regarding the nature of values, the relations between the I and the we, the questioning of what is society and the individual, whether we share responsibilities – seems to multiply and intertwine. Within this framework, Irena Lagator Pejović initiates the idea of a new, different, harmonious society – the *Society of Unlimited Responsibility*<sup>6</sup>. The genesis of her informal manifest concept, both a *criticism* and a *postulate*<sup>7</sup>, is revealed in the Derridean deconstruction of

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<sup>6</sup> Notion formed in 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Bazon Brock, *In the String Forest. Irena Lagator in Conversation with Her Rock Face Bazon Brock*, in *Irena Lagator Pejović: The Society of Unlimited Responsibility. Art as Social Strategy. 2001–2011*. Edited

the international economic term *society of limited responsibility (L.L.C)*. The *multitude* (in this new society) *does not act based on its limits, but on the non-limitation of potential creativity*. One of Irena Lagator Pejović's central arguments is thus that ethical relations and responsibility are the foundations of knowledge, art and society<sup>8</sup>.

Socially engaged and participatory art is one of the key determinants of her oeuvre, while in 2011 she begins using the term *social strategy*, which emerged in her dialogues with Bazon Brock. Space and society, seen as relational processes in the Lefebvrian sense, are topoi of investigation in the *Society of Unlimited Responsibility* (2006). In the school notebook, for the first time, pictograms of human bodies inhabit a grid of square spaces. Each geometrically stylized human figure, akin to a star, moves and circles in the *living* space of presence, without compromising the others. The questioning of reality and the relation between self and others is the consequence of the interaction with the work: the *Society of Unlimited Responsibility* appears projected into the knowledge society.

In *Ecce Mundi*, the third chamber of the Montenegrin pavilion in Venice, the humanoid figures, reduced to pictograms, conquer the spaces of the ceiling, the floor and the walls of the constructed canvas-wrapped white cube. The architectural elements of the subdivisions of space now become media, *image* mediators, where humankind can exist in peace and harmony. The nature of the pictograms and their proportions are identical to those in the school notebook of *Society of Unlimited Responsibility* (2006), a metaphor of knowledge, learning, heritage, duration. The forms are alike, but not identical – every pictogram has been hand-drawn. It is their subjectivity that separates them.

After the chamber of confrontation, where we establish the relation between the self and the universe, the individual and the collective, the visitor enters this cube of weightlessness – the *Palace of Mankind*<sup>9</sup>. The first impression is one of a nearly monochromatic empty room, but, walking through the body of the work or getting closer to its walls, one can perceive the rotating multitude of tiny pictograms of people. Individual images are created, depending on the time spent inside the work, the speed of movement and the position with respect to the work. It is our imaginations that make us different.

The pictograms, depending on the viewer's position, relate to numerical signs and symbols. Once again they activate the symbolic potential of mathematics, writing, knowledge. Writing, one of mankind's greatest achievements, emerged out of the primal need for conservation and transmission of thoughts and feelings through time and space. The first writing system was pictographic (Lat. *pictus* "painted")<sup>10</sup>. Irena Lagator Pejović does not paint the pictograms, but draws them, creating a displacement in the context of the medium which serves to emphasize the primordial in art. The drawing's support is traditional painting material, canvas, on which she digitally multiplies the square grid, the matrix of the light pictograms, while the dark ones are hand-inked. This process produces lines of different intensities, which also alludes to the intensifying of interpersonal relationships. Such canvases construct a three-dimensional space of the *image*, which you can enter and walk through. Our movements leave traces inside the

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by Christa Steinle, Karin Buol-Wischenau, Neue Galerie Graz am Universalmuseum Joanneum. Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Köln, 2012, 12.

<sup>8</sup> Irena Lagator Pejović, *doktorski umjetnički projekat: Društvo neograničene odgovornosti*, Centar za interdisciplinarnu studije, Univerzitet umetnosti, Beograd, 2012, 18.

<sup>9</sup> Irena Lagator Pejović's syntagm.

<sup>10</sup> Mile Grozdanić, *Put do knjige*, Publikum, Beograd, 2007, 17.

work, signs of our bodies that perceive and generate *images*. It is the choice and responsibility of the visitor to decide whether or not to step in and walk through the work.

The choice of the cube for the shape of the constructed space involves various intersecting axes of meaning. It subtly harks back to Malevich's white square and Sol LeWitt's volumes. At the same time, this square is an anti-dynamic shape, the symbol of solidity, wisdom, knowledge. While Christo used fabric to cover the facades of representative cultural and historical objects, in *Ecce Mundi* Irena Lagator Pejović covers the interior of the intimate space of the white cube, referring to Bachelard's conception of the house (or palace) as the greatest force of integration of thoughts, dreams and memories<sup>11</sup>. The house, as a topography of self, refracts into the *Palace of Mankind* inhabited by people harmoniously different, imaginary, yet longed-for.

By the artistic intervention in the catalogue *Camera Imaginata. The Means for Exchanging the Power of the Imagination*, three-dimensional space becomes two-dimensional. On a piece of paper, the artist has created a drawing of an open cube, which is at the same time a cross, the great signifier of our long history as well as art history (Malevich), which can be shaped by anyone, if so inclined. The unity of the time and space for action is deconstructed, and the work is open – it is the visitor who completes it, introducing *image* into the field of life itself. The text layer of the work is represented by various appeals addressed to the visitor/reader (in the imperative): *feel the presence, multiply time, imagine knowledge, define peace, create love, recall imagination*. After the experience of creating this paper object, the imperatives remain within the cube, moving into each reader's individual memory. *Camera Imaginata* is a poetic correction of our intimate experience of the world, as well as a crypto-criticism of constructed reality.

In the work *Camera Imaginata*, the function of Irena Lagator Pejović's language is similar to that of the Wiener Gruppe in the 1950s – *language as universal model for the construction of reality, carried into other media*<sup>12</sup>. Konrad Bayer's artistic act (1960)<sup>13</sup> – *give me a sheet of paper / to create a (new) world* – and Beuys's stance – *everyone is an artist* – are the mediators of the imagination in this interactive work.

The notions of *image* and *presence* are the threads that bind in the project *Image Think*, in which rhizomes are created by *image* and *thought*. In the interactive spatial work *Further than Beyond*, also alluding to icons, the image appears mediated by the golden strands of the tetrahedra, which disappear visually depending on the visitor's position, evoking the dichotomy of presence and absence. We then enter the space of *Image Think*, the space of our confrontations: the self and the universe, thought and image, image and thought. The infinitive form of the title (think) has been chosen intentionally – it is a form that invokes the infinite and the boundless. The title is also a reflection on George Orwell's *1984* and its criticism of the totalitarian society of Oceania, where numerous mechanisms constantly scrutinize and control human life. In *Ecce Mundi* (referring to the words used by Pontius Pilate to present a scourged Christ to the crowd before the Crucifixion – *Ecce Homo* "Behold the Man"), the architectural elements of the white cube of humanity are covered in canvases, which bear pictograms of people. In this constructed space of the new palace of mankind, the *Society of Unlimited*

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<sup>11</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *La poétique de l'espace*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1958.

<sup>12</sup> *The Vienna group. A moment of modernity 1954 –1960, the visual works and the actions*. Editor Peter Weibel, Springer Wien New York, 1997 (catalog of the Austrian exhibition for the biennale of Venice 1997), 15.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 168, 169.

*Responsibility* (whose paradigm is presence), *image*, *space*, *body* and *medium* intersect. Seeing that the artist's conception anticipates the movement on the canvases, their destruction, the author asks the question of whether the *society of unlimited responsibility* is possible. *Camera Imaginata* – the chamber of imagination, the artist's intervention in the catalogue, once again signalizes action instead of representation, participation instead of reception. It is a sort of a delivery/message dispatched to us on a *sheet of paper* from the Venice *Biennale*. The sender is Irena Lagator Pejović, and the answers are still forthcoming...