

Yorgos Sapountzis | Interview

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Francesca Boenzi: I recently read a metalogue by Gregory Bateson “Why do things get in a muddle”. I like it when the daughter says: “Well People spend a lot of time tidying things, but they never seem to spend time muddling them. Things just seem to get in a muddle by themselves. And the people have to tidy them up again”. I’m interested in the relation between order and chaos in your work. Your performances create a dialogue with monuments. You build up temporary structures, you interact with people. Sometimes you use surveillance cameras to film yourself as you were a vandal. And you say “I create chaos to create order”. It seems you have a need to get things in muddle, trespass into certain spaces, push certain borders...

Yorgos Sapountzis: The times when things get in a muddle are indeed central to the process of my work. One of the main reasons I originally decided to become an artist was for the opportunity to reach these moments of disarray. But it is important to understand that the process never stops there. I don't mess up an existing structure and just leave it in shambles, which is why I am precisely not a "vandal". The "muddle" is part of my method. It's what allows for surprises and chance encounters that would not happen if you were to respect the boundaries of a regular, fixed playing field. In a way, my performances are a celebration of this coincidence.

Can the installations be seen as a continuation of the performances, an order that results from them?

In many installations there's a double presentation of the materials I'm working with. In the video you see the material in action, then around it, the same material being given a space in the room, a new fix order. The combination of these two elements creates an idea of flow. I'm very fond of that line from Hamlet “Oh, that this too, too solid flesh would melt / Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew!” I attempt to show this moment of transition.

Although your work explores our relationship with ‘monuments’ and the commemorative function of certain spaces, you don’t seem interested in their specifics. In fact you erase their heritage, creating temporary, intermediate settings, switching contexts, as in “Charleroi: in memory of wealth celebration and religion”. Why this approach?

I'm not interested in the public sculptures as historical artifacts, but as points in a city, containers of some pooled energy. In the end, it doesn't matter whether the bronze statue is of a Prussian general or not. If I were to take the sculptures as starting point for historical research, I'd be using an established, accepted way of approaching them and that's precisely what I'm trying to avoid. When I first moved to Berlin, I didn't know who the public sculptures depicted, I just knew they were important for somebody. But on the other hand, I loved to visit them and wonder: “Why are they here, will they always be here?” rather than trying to answer this question, I decided to confront them with my own practice, to attach myself to them. The works started to become what I call “parasitic sculpture”.

Could you explain that?

They are structures I put on top of existing monuments to draw energy from them. You can see this in my first video works. In the Charleroi piece, which is more recent, you instead see a big installation with two video projections. In one I use all the sculptures and monuments in Mechelen and in the other I'm in the central square with three ordinary citizens, who build a structure and carry it around the city. My intention was to create a transition between my abstract structures and the renovated façades of the city, the bodies of the citizens and the appearance of the statues. And me trying to find a place in all this.

But why is it called "Charleroi" if everything takes place in Mechelen?

I didn't want to make a piece about Mechelen. I wanted to explore our relationship with the cities where we live in and their past. I changed the name of the city that I was working on to create a timeless, abstract idea about citizens and their limits in public space.

How do you involve people in the performances? Do they receive instructions?

In the beginning, I was the only person performing, but I always thought of performances as an interaction between the audience and myself. To stress this aspect, I started bringing people over to "my side". In Mannheim, for "Cells of Time", I worked with 16 teenagers from a local high school, in a week long workshop followed by a one-hour performance. It was great! In more recent performances, I've dressed up the audience in newspaper hats and pieces of cloth. I've also had food and drinks for them. For "After Electricity: The Festival" the audience and I walked through a park. I told them I wanted to make a film with them and as a form of thanks, I asked different theatre groups and singers to perform. It turned into a kind of impromptu festival.

How rigid is the structure of these performances?

I always know the general framework and basic chapters. Within this, there is freedom for movement and interaction between the audience and me.

Would you say there's a ritual aspect to your work?

That's not my intention, though the audience may see one. For me performance is a highly intense presentation of my practice, in which the audience is looking at me and I use their expectation to discover my relationship to my work. At first I was afraid of performing in public but it was always very tempting to test this limit. It's like baptizing the materials in front of a public; I then feel more connected to them and can use them again to make an installation or a sculpture.

Some of the things you say remind me of Helio Oiticica. His "Parangolés" tried to expand the artistic act and free it of over-intellectualization. This attempt to de-intellectualize the work seems like a key part of your practice, too...

That's right. I'm not interested in following a theory or recipe, as that would inevitably lead to disappointment. The actual performance would always be only an approximation of the theoretical concept, an imperfect version of an ideal. Instead, I start with a set number of elements that play into the performance – the city, the people, the monuments - and just filter them through myself. Rather than taking an ideal theory and subtracting things to reach reality, I take reality and add something to it. I try to create a new reality, one which is open to being messed with all over again.