

Most [The Bridge]: Intermedia performance

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"When I invoke the terms 'Germany' or 'Bulgaria' these are imaginary relations; they aren't so much places as narratives about places, and I really believe that all our relations to place are mediated in these ways." (Gunew, 1998)

I will address plurality of cross-cultural identity in Australia in this paper through a performance art project *Most* [The Bridge] and its predecessor *Katedrala*. This ongoing project was exhibited through simultaneous performative encounters that took place between three actions in Perth, Zürich and Melbourne. Performers, who were located in these cities, corresponded to each other via telephone. The transmitted verbal content from public transport in Zürich and Melbourne was translated by language of gestural painting in a gallery space in Perth on two separate occasions. The strategy of telephonic conversation, or *monologue à deux*,

in this project provides a possibility to portray 'third space' or 'space in-between,' often assigned to migrant situations. It is this space that puts into question the relationship between the 'real' space of 'here and now' and the 'imaginary' space of 'there and then.'

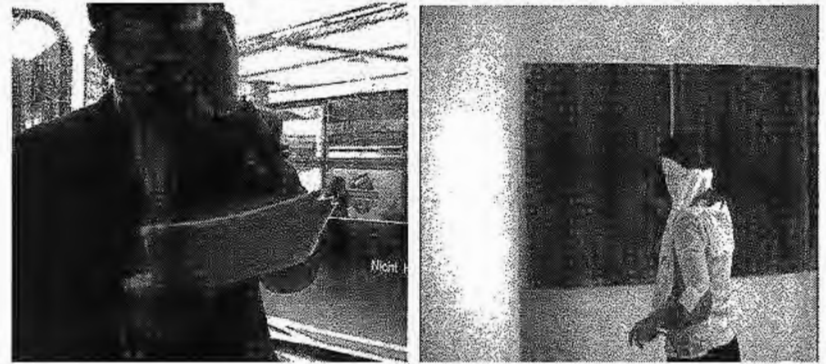
One of the underlying elements in this project was assigned to conceptual investigation of migration, as described by Sneja Gunew in the citation above. Migration and identity politics are approached through displacement, and redefinition of space and place. This conceptual framework surrounds the performance through portrayal of telephone as an umbilical portal between places and simultaneous action.

Before describing the project and defining its parallel theoretical outcomes, I will briefly define my position as a migrant artist, currently residing in Australia. I moved to Australia in 1995 as a result of the ongoing political tensions in former Yugoslavia. It was in Australia that I began seeing my own past and my own experience of living in Yugoslavia from a distance. The plurality of cross-cultural spaces and their boundaries in Australia multiplied even further in comparison to my previous native experience. The transit and an incessant desire to 'return home' have started to inform my art practice through acquisition of language that could express in-between spaces, and through the transient medium of temporal performance. The idea of transit and memory inspired performative progression of projects such as *Most* [The Bridge] and *Katedrala*.

Temporal performance is a medium that could effectively represent transience of cross-cultural dialogues through performative expression. I decided to create intermediate projects that reflect upon the methodology of communication in order to bridge the gap between distances. The telecommunication utilised in the context of these performances introduces a certain level of unpredictability associated with the technical and corresponding outcomes.

There will be three sections addressed separately in this paper. The first section will describe the project and its outline. The second section will define the terminology of the 'bridge' and ways it was applied in art. The theoretical framework that delineates Paul Carter's concept of 'in-between spaces' will be discussed in third section.

Project description: *Katedrala*



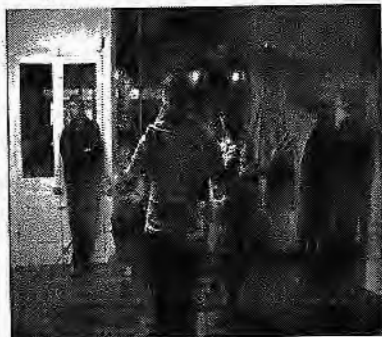
Each of the two projects consists of two performance intervals. First in the sequence was *Katedrala*, which took place over the course of two days in May 2005. The two days were marked as two intervals, in which I corresponded with two artists, Martin Heine and Nela Trifković. The artists were scheduled to answer the phone, whilst riding their local public transport in the direction West – East, in two different cities (Zürich, Switzerland, and Melbourne, Australia). In the first interval, Heine answered the phone in Zürich at 7pm (Perth time) on Monday May 23, 2005. Trifković corresponded as a part of the second interval from Melbourne at the same time three days later.

Answering of the phone marked the beginning of verbal image interpretation of six pre-given images. The images were prints obtained from randomly selected slides related to my memories in Yugoslavia. The images were outdated, slightly scratched, and blurry. The two collaborators were filmed by an accompanying person while describing the details of the given images. Simultaneously, at the gallery space in Perth I painted blindfolded onto six sequenced canvases while receiving the instructions.

The synchronicity was supposed to take place between the incoming sound of the telecommunicative directives and the blindfolded painting process. The telephone was connected to the speakers to enable a 'real time' transmission of the collaborators' voices. The canvases were displayed on one side of the gallery, while the slides were projected onto the opposite wall. The projected slides were identical to the images used by the correspondents. The images were sequenced equally, both in the gallery space and on the trams. The incoming verbal image interpretation was meant to correspond with the painting process of sequenced canvases. Therefore, the telephonic instruction turned into the content of a painted form. The act of blindfolded painting provided a semiotic vehicle that questioned the impossibility of the accuracy of pre-given task.

The outcome of the performance resulted in the movements of disorientation within the gallery space. The intention to perform in synchronicity appeared controlled during the time planning of the event. What really happened? The synchronicity between the projected images and painting of the designated sequenced canvases gradually collapsed. There were also elements of unpredictability of the telecommunication outcomes.

Project description: *Most* [The Bridge]



The assemblages of segments, driven through changes, in *Katedrala* initiated my intention to create the next temporal event, *Most* [The Bridge]. The assemblages of this consecutive project were measured by action and time corresponding to projection of video documentation of *Katedrala*'s remote performances. The spatial display of this event consisted of prepared blue-grey canvases hung on two opposing walls in the gallery space. The spoken directive language was contained within the obtained video document of Heine's and Trifković's performance on the premise of their local public transport. The two videos were projected in synchronicity over the grey canvases. I painted over them with white paint in order to gradually reveal the subtleties of the projections.

The revealing process of the projections with white paint implied a negative space. In this way, the content of the paintings was not supposed to incur a figurative and gestural representation of the image. On the contrary, the painting was a paradox where the materiality of it was meant to break down what was already visible and implied by video projections. The white paint emphasised portions of the moving figures of my collaborators from *Katedrala*. The projected body in given location became fragmented. The imprint of the painting itself did not leave a recognisable form on the canvas. Instead, there was left a freshly primed white surface, whose content could only be seen during the performative encounter.

The broken down synchronicity in *Most* [The Bridge] was conceived as a succession of the collapse of the 'real time' communication or monologue à deux of simultaneous actions in *Katedrala*. The two video documentations obtained by Heine and Trifković were edited in such a way to mimic each other's duration.

Heine's objective interpretative performance in Zürich public transport was twice as short as Trifković's analytic and associative image interpretation. For this reason, excerpts from Melbourne footage were removed, whilst the Zürich footage was extended. By modifying the footage duration, the synchronicity break down was embedded within the finalised video.

Definition of project terminology

Most, a word which in Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian, Slovenian, Macedonian and other Slavic languages stands for 'bridge,' signifies communication and transmission of information cross-culturally. The documentation of transmission of the interpreted site specifics determined by the spatial positioning of the correspondents provided an objective form of analysis of each particular place. Each locational interpretation generated an associative analysis that entailed historical and immediate geo-political confluence of each site. This was manifested through the visual content of the projections, and awareness of their surrounding.

In his novel, *The Bridge on the Drina*, Ivo Andrić, a Yugoslav novelist and poet, utilised the metaphor of the 'bridge' as a paradoxically connecting and dividing edifice between places and as a commentary on the historical events informed by colonisation and its resulting exodus in the areas of former Yugoslavia. (Bjelčić, 2002, pp.15-16). The signification of 'bridge' in this sense becomes transposed to the geo-political and social positioning of former Yugoslavia as a bridge between East and West, between diverse religions, and between multiplicities of racisms. The 1999 bombing of Serbia by the NATO forces resulted in destruction of bridges, among many other targets, in the metropolitan areas. This action became symbolic of the break-down of communication.

In order to further illustrate the conceptual application of the term 'bridge,' I will mention a German art movement *Die Brücke* (The Bridge) that was formed in 1905. The aim of the group was to establish a bridge between art and life. Throughout the group's evolution, art became not only a sense of liberation that could express individual feelings, but grew more towards the "basic fears and desires of a nation by a sense of impending disaster" (Herbert 1983, p.8) in the years prior to the First World War.

Also, three simultaneous retrospective exhibitions of a Yugoslavian performance artist Marina Abramović's work ran under the title *The Bridge/El Puente*. The exhibitions were spread across *Lonja del Pescado* in Alicante and *Sala La Gallera* and *Teatro Rialto* in Valencia in Spain. The terminology of *El Puente* refers to the interconnectivity between three venues, literal constructs and symbolic and conceptual representations of her current and past projects. In one of the galleries in Alicante, Abramović built an elevated catwalk that displayed instability and vulnerability of the temporary structure through the direct sensation and experience of walking across the edifice. Conceptually, *El Puente* also refers to the in-between

spaces experienced through exploration of transitory spaces in relation to body, image and memory.

Pablo J. Rico stated in the introduction to Abramović's catalogue that

bridges are passages, dangerous spaces for transit and voyage between two foreign territories, open places where the wind blows... With this fitting symbolism of the bridge, Abramović also vindicates her origins in the Balkans: a cultural and ethnic space between East and West; a land of transit, of danger; a land swept by the winds of war and extreme feelings; a passage and corridor where survival is extremely difficult... Invoking the image of the bridge is a way of recovering memories and familiar situations, from those moments before the beginning of her voyage to so many places. (Rico 1998, p.18)

In my controlled performative actions, I have taken the symbol of the bridge to the gradual collapse of synchronicity. The communication between simultaneous performances collapsed, yet something was still left over that was useful. Relationships between the language and the visual form, between authority and action, between the ephemeral nature of projected material and the materialising process of painting, between subjective associations and objective descriptions developed new meaning.

Throughout the performance *Katedrala*, the communication process took place in 'real-time'. In this case, the notion of presence was two-fold. Each presence, the actual (my own) and projected (the telephone) were connected by lack. My inability to see where I was going, and how I was materialising the movement directed by the distant voice, was devoid of a sense of orientation. It was a performed sense of self distanced from itself, and in an absurd way guided by the absent voice from the distance. As a result, a dichotomy between here and there, past and present formed. The difference between past and present was actual, geographically compressed in the controlled performative environment.

The theoretical framework

The theoretical framework applies Carter's notion of the 'in-between spaces' to the described performative situations. The concept will be looked at in terms of the application of the cross-cultural background to the formal aspects of the performances. It will also be discussed in terms of communication process or monologue à deux of the simultaneous performances.

The in-between space is a concept derived from Derrida's deconstruction philosophy. However, through the work of Homi Bhabha and others the term has been applied to postcolonial and migrant situations to theorise an ambivalent 'third' space between departure and arrival. This transient space can become rich in expressive potential whilst addressing the possibility of artistic representation of identity. Paul Carter, an Australian cultural theorist and a sound artist of British descent, has done most to theorise and apply the aesthetic potential of the concept. For him in-between spaces are experienced phenomenologically in terms of

movement rather than through static images, and hence are primarily fully somatic (i.e. bodily) rather than just visual. 'Perhaps migrant's new world is heard not seen; perhaps the experience of speaking for the first time is connected with [phonetic experience of] 'states and movements in space' (Carter 1992, p.16).

Carter is particularly interested in the moment of first contact and the creative potential of initial attempts to map new spaces of translation between the self and the other and also to speak and understand the other, whose language we do not necessarily understand. In this process of attempting to understand translation, we apply verbal gestures of mimicry, and accompanying motions by the arms. In Carter's sense, 'this mimicry is not meant to parody communication, to undermine assertions of authority. It is a historical device for keeping the future open, for delineating a space where, in future, misapprehensions and differences can begin to form the basis of a new cross-cultural argot' (Carter 1992, p.13).

Drawing on Carter's ideas the focus of directive communication forms its relationship with the consequential and simultaneous action. The dialogue between the two dominant geo-political and socio-cultural domains, Australia and former Yugoslavia is approached from the context of the multiplicity of transitions between cartographically remote urban spaces, between multiplicities of individual and collective memories. The two specified cultural spaces are defined by relationship of both disembodied and actual presence in the performative environment. Thus the collaborators set within 'Other' urban contexts could portray the voice from the distance that informed the consequential action at the gallery space in Perth.

The in-between space has been appropriated to performances by the sense of the re-occurring loop between the self and the other. This can be seen through the possibilities of representation within space through multiplicity and assemblage of audio/video projected and performative information.

Carter said that "the idea of improvised dialogue," or directive in the context of my performances, "changes the meaning of acting" (Carter 1992, p.18). A script of these performances was not so much about acting, but the processes that incorporate the presence of the body devoid of facial expressions in space and according to the script was meant to reinforce the transmitted imperative descriptions onto canvas.

"The voice we authorise [or that authorises us] and cling to implies an imperium of silence. How we compose our surroundings determines how our surroundings are to be. The problem is not to preserve differences but to devise new movements between them. And if they are to succeed, the movements will have to be as much poetic as political" (Carter 1992, p.22). Poetics implies a world we would like to inhabit in terms of gaining some freedom of thought and spirit. The delineated space in between cannot be confined in a proleptic tradition of defining of postcolonial identity as an "attempt to give mimicry a respectable meaning" (Carter 1992, p.22). Poetics implies also a fertile space between the history and politics.

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