

## Dreamcatcher

...*Nommer* un objet, c'est supprimer les trois quarts de la jouissance du poème, qui est faite de deviner peu à peu: Le *suggérer*, voilà le rêve.<sup>1</sup>  
(...To *name* an object is to suppress three quarters of the enjoyment of the poem, which is made to be divined bit by bit: to *suggest* it, that is the dream.)

On a particularly muggy day in July, we are standing around the almost-ready-to-install work of Lucia Tkáčová and Anetta Mona Chisa. The work is still without a title. It is the most recent public art commission for the *Invisible Štiavnica* project. We are standing beneath a rusty, decommissioned mining tower, the structure soars above the height of the multi-story apartment building behind it. The grass reaches past my knees and is wet below each crest from last night's summer thunderstorm. The art work, laying at my feet appears to be a huge *dreamcatcher*, associated with the First Nations Peoples of North America. It is instantly recognisable, although I don't recall ever having seen one in North America. It's woven, white, circular, spiders web stretches nine metres in diameter. 600 golden cd's hang in fifteen trails from its base, and each string is weighted with an object that has been meticulously constructed from brilliantly coloured, plastic junk. There are two heaped bunches of shredded white plastic shopping bags attached to either side of the web, imitating clusters of soft, white feathers.

Public art can be a powerfully polarising subject. The most interesting stories —aside from those of near disaster involving material miscalculation — have been those of misinterpretation or reappropriation of the work by their “public.” These stories have captivated us because they embody the questions that we endlessly ask ourselves as artists, curators, commissioners and audiences of public works; which public, by whom and for whom? Who can say what, and who in turn might be silenced? The necessity of such questions has become the public artworks content and context, its commentary and its ability to enter institutional and academic discourse. Questions have become the public artwork itself, and increasingly, it seems too often that answers follow immediately. Value is easily assigned to the public artwork that embodies the act of asking, and then somehow folding on itself, answers its own questions. If the answer is there, the question need not be asked, *seeing* the work, is relegated to fact checking.

*Invisible Štiavnica* is an ongoing project that attempts to deal with a range of questions around (in)visibility and public artworks. A series of commissions have been accumulating throughout the town of Banská Štiavnica for the last 24 months. The project has elicited a range of subtle, and dematerialised projects in its short but prolific lifespan. Responses to the project have been concerned both with material and conceptual invisibility, and an engagement with site specificity, local narrative and (proposed) local communities.

I step back to watch as one of the artists' checks the fixings of the weights, working her way around the circle in the grass. The dreamcatcher is disconcertingly large; the cd's stretch several meters away from me, disappearing in the thick damp green. Studying one of the coloured weights — it appears to be made from a plaster filled

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<sup>1</sup> Mallarmé, quoted by Albert Cook (1998) in: “‘Etendre, simplifier le monde’: The Philosophical Purchase of Mallarmé,” in: *Mallarmé in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Robert Greer Cohn, New Jersey: Associated University Presses, Inc. pp 53 - 85

plastic ball, a refashioned feather duster, a length of cheap gold climbing rope and an old, branded and carefully cut, shopping bag. Removed from the seething, sparkling sea of objects at one of those stores (that sells everything cheap, plastic, brightly coloured and, *made in china*) and lovingly reassembled here, the weight is an undeniably *uncanny* object. It maintains a trace of its origins — but it has become unique and crafted. It betrays any kind of *DIY* aesthetic by sitting too comfortably between selected, collected, found, purchased and now placed. It is humorous and sculptural, hanging on the end of a golden thread of scales, with 90's smash hit titles scribbled across their faces in permanent marker.

I am reminded of Marie de Brugerolle describing the 'props' that Guy de Cointet mobilised in his plays, she calls them, "objects as texts... as they contain part of the lines of the play in an encrypted manner. Some of them are maps some of them are used to memorize part of a story, others as optical tools."<sup>2</sup> She delineates between these objects and the ready-made because the ready-made, she says, "never returns to the supermarket." Each component of this dreamcatcher has this same multitudinous status in its coming to be a part of the whole. As we decipher the origins of each cheap, ubiquitous object, others fall out of focus, becoming unfamiliar in their familiarity, something like Brechts cauliflowers;

"They play an exemplary double game between denouncing the law of the market and using ways of deriding high art borrowed from the market of debasement culture [...] one may play at once on the radical separation between the world of art and that of cauliflowers *and* on the permeability of the border that separates them."<sup>3</sup>

This separation and making permeable the borders between art and the everyday, between players and props, demands a perpetual reassessment of objects, audiences and the surrounding milieu. Looking is an intentional activity, a constant movement and negotiation between two or more bodies in an exchange, wherein hierarchies of *looking* can be the same, whilst what is *seen* can remain unique.<sup>4</sup> This dreamcatcher is an *assemblage*, an object that cannot be fully known. It demands a constant re-reading from within and from without, perpetually, in time and in space.<sup>5</sup> Specifically in this space; the site for the public art commission.

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<sup>2</sup> If I Can't Dance and Marie de Brugerolle in Conversation, *Guy de Cointet – Marie de Brugerolle*, at: <http://ificantdance.com/PerformanceInResidence/MarieDeBrugerolle#id=/ReadMore/IfICantDanceAndMarieDeBrugerolleInConversation%3Fref%3DPerformersController> (accessed 18 August 2014)

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Rancière (2004), "Problems and Transformations in Critical Art" in: *Participation Documents of Contemporary Art*, ed. Claire Bishop, London: Whitechapel Gallery, pp 83 - 93

<sup>4</sup> Eduardo Vivieros de Castro, in a study of *perspectival multinaturalism*, based on practices of specific Amerindian societies, describes a perspectival ontology that, "proceeds as though 'the point of view creates the subject:' whatever is activated or 'agented' by the point of view will be a subject."<sup>4</sup> The notion that *everything* is a *someone* universalises the notion of the "intentional stance," thereby opening the notion of perspective to "reveal a maximum of intentionality or abduct a maximum of agency." it becomes impossible to reduce anything that is not fully "known," or understood, to an "insufficiently analysed object," a *multinaturalist* perspective would imply the need for, and the possibility of, a continuous and more active *looking*. This will allow each subject in an exchange, or series of exchanges, to remain an active subject in constant flux. One who cannot be reduced, and more importantly cannot be *fixed*, as a single action within a causal chain, subjects can only be *continuously* understood. Furthermore, they must be related to other subjects, who are *continuously being* understood, or otherwise expanded on through mythology.

<sup>5</sup> An assemblage is an: "Art form in which natural and manufactured, traditionally non-artistic, materials and objets trouvés are assembled into three-dimensional structure [...] In an assemblage the banal, often tawdry materials retain their individual physical and functional identity, despite artistic manipulation. From: Oxford University Press at : [http://www.moma.org/collection/details.php?theme\\_id=10057](http://www.moma.org/collection/details.php?theme_id=10057) (accessed 18 August 2014) However, here I would like to suggest that the dreamcatcher could also be thought through philosopher Manuel De Landa's concept of assemblage - "DeLanda gives us the assemblage, his central concept. The word 'assemblage'

The site is the outskirts of a small town in central Slovakia. The tower that we stand beneath sits high above the centre of Banská Štiavnica. The artists have brought us out to Šobov. Behind us, is a large apartment block — former miners accommodation — that is now home to more than 300 families. Roma families were relocated to this site on the outskirts of Banská Štiavnica from the town's historic centre during the economic redevelopment of the 90's. Unless you live in this apartment block, it is unlikely that you would ever find yourself in this part of town. Living conditions here can be difficult, with no proper heating or waste disposal, and it is said that due to the mining that took place here, a radioactive substance (Radon) leaks from the ground. Roma residents are ostracised in Banská Štiavnica, pushed up the hill to Šobov where they cannot be seen, isolated geographically and by an impermeable social border. Šobov is the periphery.

And now, it is us who are *outsiders* here in Sobov and it is palpable. We locked the car when we left it and we did not take our mobile phones. This space is peripheral, not only because it is on the edge of a small town but because the *rules* are different here. Not *knowing* the conventions of this community is not being part of it. Even though the children are smiling at me, I am aware of their eyes on me, of my fear of being an uneducated *other* in this space, of my mounting curiosity at what is in that building. I am more than a little apprehensive at this immediate confrontation with the sense of entitlement that I have carried — up until this point — throughout my time in Slovakia, even though I do not speak the language. Here, my lack of understanding is much deeper than the language barrier. I can only *look*.

There are fifteen laughing children tumbling wildly around my feet in the long grass. There are two curators, two artists, friends and assistants; all eyes fixed on the two climbers at the top of the tower. The smallest of the children are crawling through the roped, white, web, inside of the ring, they are screaming and giggling, inexhaustible and asking repeatedly: “Čo je anglické slovo pre *Spiderman*?” Everyone is negotiating the grounded sculpture. Planning its ascent, predicting any possible hitches in the hanging from the tower - asking if it is a trampoline. Tkáčová is fielding the endless questions in her native Slovak and translating for the rest of us as she checks the strength of the knots. “Čo je anglické slovo pre trampolínu?” “How will you get it up there?” “Who will climb the tower?” “Will the tower fall on us?” “What is the English word for Indian?” I am struck by the fact that no one has asked *what are you doing here, or, why?*

Looking back at the dilapidated apartment block there are more than fifty windows that look out through the tower and over the valley. The city centre is not visible from up here. A crowd of *insiders* is growing steadily on the edge of the road, to the side of the building where they have a good view — from a distance — of the dreamcatcher. There are three teenagers throwing rubbish from the roof, staring down at the small crowd at the base of the tower. What will the people who live here think when they look out at the dreamcatcher everyday? This huge cultural, spiritual object that is of

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covers all real entities, including humans, rocks, corporations, and nation states. If every assemblage can be termed a 'person,' then every assemblage is made up of subpersonal components as well. There is no final layer of ultimate reality to which larger assemblages can be reduced.” Graham Harman, *DeLanda's ontology: assemblage and realism*, Published online: 10 September 2008: Springer Science+Business Media B.V. (accessed [http://indexofpotential.net/uploads/41318/3907-delandas\\_ontology\\_assemblage\\_and.pdf](http://indexofpotential.net/uploads/41318/3907-delandas_ontology_assemblage_and.pdf) (accessed 19<sup>th</sup> of August 2014) - in keeping with an element of a *Multinaturalist perspective* to be introduced later.

another place and peoples and installed by another again? Is it ok to just put this here? Is it ok for *us* to put this anywhere? The building is opaque, most of the windows are curtained, I have no idea what the inside of that building looks like, who lives there, what they are doing out on the road and what they will think about the object we are hanging? Will they be as uncomfortable as I am with what seems to be a potential disaster seen as an act of cultural appropriation?

Exposure to the institutional discourse surrounding the many problems with such acts of cultural appropriation (when performed by the majority culture on the minority culture) have made me fear the very suggestion of it. The oppression, the theft and the colonial obliteration made possible by an appropriation of First Nations peoples spiritual, cultural and aesthetic customs and objects. Cultural appropriation can be insidious, and deadly. It can also be used to shift power back in the other direction, turning the oppressors tools back upon the oppressor, most often in cases where oppressive language is appropriated by its victims and injected with new or alternate meanings in powerful reclamations by communities. But is this what is happening here? In central Slovakia, when a Slovak and a Romanian artist hang a dreamcatcher in an overgrown lot on the outskirts of a small town is it a case of theft? Does it make a difference that it was the Ojibwa people, specifically women, who are said to have first made dreamcatchers, to protect sleeping children? That during the Pan-Indian movement of the 1960's and 70's, the dreamcatcher was used to represent peoples from present day South America to the far north of Canada? And now, via the efficiency and effectiveness of global capitalism and trade, there are dreamcatchers for sale in every junk store in the world? Arguably the Ojibwe people are still the only people who understand their significance; arguably there is still a misappropriation of these and other objects that is offensive, dangerous, oppressive and in some cases even racist. But is this the case here? *Which public, by whom and for whom? Who can say what, and who in turn might be silenced?* Does it make a difference that the children in the grass at my feet are captivated, that the *Indians* in their stories are heroic?

It occurs to me that standing here, behind a building home to a Roma community, hanging a dreamcatcher, what I am looking for; is transparency. Institutionally and personally, I am looking for complete and fixed understanding, or at least somebody whom I might look *through* to understand. I am trying to discard a complex series of not-understandings to find myself a neat set of Western artworld answers, *the right ones*. In a call for the right to opacity, in *Poetics of Relation*, Édouard Glissant writes:

The opaque is not the obscure, though it is possible for it to be so and be accepted as such. It is that which cannot be reduced, which is the most perennial guarantee of participation and confluence. We are far from the opacities of Myth or Tragedy, whose obscurity was accompanied by exclusion and whose transparency aimed at “grasping.” In this version of understanding the verb *to grasp* contains the movement of hands that grab at their surroundings and bring them back to themselves. A gesture of enclosure if not appropriation. Let our understanding prefer the gesture of giving-on-and-with that opens finally on totality.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Édouard Glissant (1997) “For Opacity” in: *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, pp189 – 194.

No one has stepped forward to act as my interpreter, no one has offered to open the curtains on all those windows behind me, I am, in a way locked out, with only myself. This might be what this dreamcatcher does. Rather than *grasping* and rendering transparent a set of ideas, objects, social, cultural and moral codes; instead of highlighting the plight of one peoples or another, or cobbling together a notion of *community* for scrutiny by a fascinated audience. The artists have instead chosen a series of *objects as texts, encrypted maps, optical tools*. Not without question, simply without a single answer. The artists ask only that I stand uncomfortably here, surrounded by a collision of things that are opaque, and have the right to be so. The artists have not chosen thoughtlessly but they have chosen without recourse to explanation. And they chose not for themselves or for a falsely implicated community, but for a public, without delineating whom that public is.

In appropriating what has already been appropriated, does one highlight the damage done by the original, or contribute to further misuse? Does this dreamcatcher perform a reduction of *other people's things*, or rather, a reduction of knowledge of whom *other people are*? Perhaps this particular dreamcatcher challenges knowledge by assuming none? Every component of the work, its origins, its milieu and its use—like each of those uncanny weights—remains opaque. The artists have made a series of selections that allow us to *focus on the weave*, which of course, is completely transparent. Questions remain, but they remain unanswerable to me, beyond myself, I am unable to be the guardian of any absolute truths. I am only able, in the *excessive chaos* of this work, to look after my own identity.<sup>7</sup> And that is all. And the dreamcatcher here—unreadable and bizarre, encrypted sacred junk, perfectly placed and wildly alien—might afford everyone here the same possibility. Scale and location, transform this parodically oversized object, into an encrypted marker for a series of questions that institutional rhetoric had me asking habitually, not critically. The dreamcatcher moves within a continual need for refocus and is unwilling to declare itself complete and legible. It is not closed and it is not *just*. It is not *democratic* it is confusing, paradoxical, disconcerting, and in light of these it is powerful.<sup>8</sup> One can only *look* without looking *through* or *into*.

And what do the locals think of this spectacle? And here, I mean *spectacle* as that which sits at the intersection of *pure presentness, political critique, and aesthetics* as proposed by Claire Bishop:

This new proximity between spectacle and participation underlines, for me, the necessity of sustaining a tension between artistic and social critiques. The most striking projects that constitute the history of participatory art unseat all of the polarities on which this discourse is founded (individual/collective, author/spectator, active/passive, real life/art) but not with the goal of

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<sup>7</sup> Glissant, "For Opacity," pp189 – 194.

<sup>8</sup> "The most challenging works of art do not follow this schema, because models of democracy in art do not have an intrinsic relationship to models of democracy in society. The equation is misleading and does not recognize art's ability to generate other, more paradoxical criteria. The works I have discussed in the preceding chapters do not offer anything like citizen control. The artist relies upon the participants' creative exploitation of the situation that he/she offers, just as participants require the artist's cue and direction. This relationship is a continual play of mutual tension, recognition, and dependency—more akin to the collectively negotiated dynamic of stand-up comedy, or to BDSM sex, than to a ladder of progressively more virtuous political forms." Claire Bishop (2011), *Participation and Spectacle: Where Are We Now?* Lecture for Creative Time's Living as Form, Cooper Union, New York, May 2011. Published online at: <http://dieklaumichshow.org/pdfs/Bishop.pdf> (accessed 19th August, 2014)

collapsing them. In so doing, they hold the artistic and social critiques in tension.<sup>9</sup>

The children stop tumbling in the grass and we stand together watching the tower. The white webbed ring is leaving the ground, the CD's are catching lightly in the grass, the coloured weights are dragging and bouncing awkwardly as everything — the gaze of now more than seventy onlookers— is drawn slowly upwards. The sun is hot and bright, everyone is quiet. Long golden strings are suddenly caught in the air against the blue sky and everything sparkles. It is spectacular.

What I do know is that nowhere does this work make the claim that it *ought to*. That it *ought to* change communications, improve someone else's living conditions, further relations, or make transparent differences between people for a *better* understanding. This public artwork is difficult because it unapologetically asks questions that people must ask constantly. It asks them, more concerned with the *asking*, than with the fears and the concerns that they evoke. In doing so, most questions will remain unanswered, beyond fixed understanding and immediate legibility. This artwork has set about creating a deliberate and dizzying reversal of notions of periphery, of insiders and outsiders, of opacity and transparency, of knowledge and not-knowledge. This dreamcatcher might provoke a reaction beyond the managed quarter of the institutionally approved artwork. You must go and stand, uncomfortably inside of all of your questions, and remember that they are your questions. And when you remember that you cannot speak for, understand or demand transparency from another, you remember that if you hang a dreamcatcher outside of *someone's* window, outside of *someone's* town, *someone* can climb the tower to cut it down.

I don't think that the dreamcatcher will be cut down. Because honestly? It is beautiful. It is fascinating and it is uncanny. It captures so gently, in its slow rocking, that unfamiliar sense of familiarity, the power of the spectacle. It is brave and it is humorous, it's colourful plastic junk shop ephemera, collected and intricately assembled into small perfect coloured beads. It is *stand-up comedy and BDSM sex*; it is *cauliflowers*. It's lengths of cheap white rope, woven delicately into a spider's web, disappearing now against the white clouds. Its elegant strings of shining golden cd's catching the sunlight. It is so beautiful.

The dreamcatcher almost disappears with the sun as the sky clouds over in the evening. What lay in the grass; heavy with questions, huge and strange, with fifteen children crawling through it, and fifteen adults circling it nervously, disappears now as it turns sideways. It is so transparent, that it has become almost invisible. As we pack up to go back to the locked car, I am laughing at a group of boys showing off in the fading daylight. They are throwing themselves into the grass in elaborate half cartwheels, pulling film-style karate moves, looking at me and yelling thousands of exciting things at me that I can't understand. Only every now and then, do I think I hear *Jackie Chan*, but I'm not sure.

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<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*