

BESIDES THE OBJECT ITSELF



Sharing a sculptural concern with the overlap of art objects and spatial displays, **THEA DJORDJADZE** and **TOBIAS PUTRIH** discuss practice, interaction, referentiality, and how an artist's gesture can be akin to lovemaking.

Thea Djordjadze
Exhibition view, kaufmann repetto,
Milan, 2010
Courtesy: kaufmann repetto, Milan

interview by **ELENA FILIPOVIC**

ARTISTS' BIO

THEA DJORDJADZE (b. 1971) is a Georgian artist who lives and works in Berlin. She has had solo shows at, among others, Kunstverein Nürnberg, Sprüth Magers, Köln and Berlin; Kunsthalle Basel; Westlondonprojects, London; Micky Schubert, Berlin; Foksal Gallery Foundation, Warsaw; and most recently, Galleria Kaufmann Repetto, Milan.

TOBIAS PUTRIH (b. 1972) is a Slovenian artist who lives and works in Cambridge and New York. He represented Slovenia at the 2007 Venice Biennale and has had solo shows at Galleria Civica, Modena; Espace d'arts contemporains, Geneva; Galerija Gregor Podnar, Berlin; Boijmans Van Beuningen Museum, Rotterdam; BALTIC Center for Contemporary Art, Gateshead; and MIT List Visual Art Center, Cambridge.

CURRENT & FORTHCOMING

THEA DJORDJADZE's work is currently exhibited within the group show "The New Decor" at the Garage Center for Contemporary Culture, Moscow.

TOBIAS PUTRIH, in collaboration with architects MOS, is now having a solo show at the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio, on view until next February.

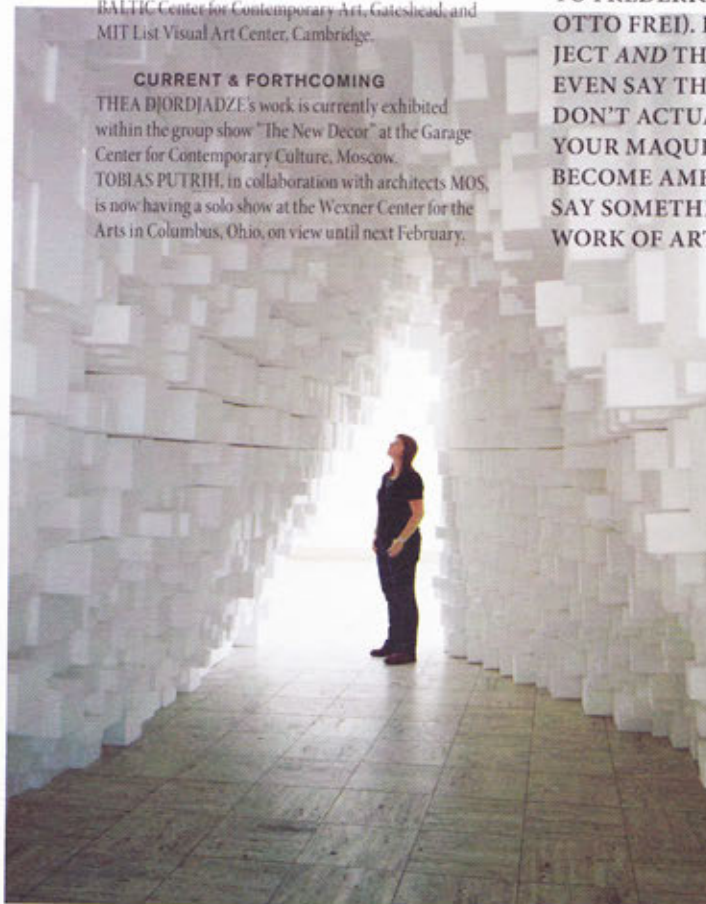
TO CONDUCT A JOINT INTERVIEW WITH YOU TWO WOULD HARDLY BE AN OBVIOUS CHOICE FOR SOME. BUT I WANTED TO BRING YOU TOGETHER BECAUSE, WHILE THE CENTRAL MEDIUM FOR BOTH OF YOU IS, TECHNICALLY, SCULPTURE, YOU HAVE DIFFERENT WAYS OF GOING BEYOND THE IDEA OF SCULPTURE AS AN AUTONOMOUS ENTITY. LET ME EXPLAIN: THEA, YOUR WORK IS AS CONCERNED WITH THE DISPLAY STRUCTURES ON WHICH OBJECTS ARE MEANT TO SIT AS WITH THE OBJECT ITSELF (IF ONE CAN EVEN SPEAK OF AN "OBJECT ITSELF," FOR IT'S OFTEN HARD TO TELL WHERE YOUR SCULPTURES BEGIN AND YOUR DISPLAY STRUCTURES END). TOBIAS, YOUR SCULPTURES ARE OFTEN ARCHITECTURAL IN SCALE AND IN TERMS OF THEIR REFERENCES (WITH NODS TO FREDERICH KIESLER, BUCKMINSTER FULLER, AND MOST RECENTLY, OTTO FREI). BUT LIKE THEA'S, THEY ALSO END UP BEING BOTH THE OBJECT AND THE DISPLAY STRUCTURE FOR THE OBJECT, OR ONE COULD EVEN SAY THAT BECOME THE DISPLAY STRUCTURE FOR AN OBJECT YOU DON'T ACTUALLY MAKE. YOU ALSO OFTEN DESIGNS PEDESTALS FOR YOUR MAQUETTES AND SCULPTURAL OBJECTS, AND THOSE PEDESTALS BECOME AMBIGUOUS EXTENSIONS OF THE ARTWORK. CAN YOU EACH SAY SOMETHING ABOUT THE STUFF THAT GOES AROUND THE SUPPOSED WORK OF ART?

Thea Djordjadze: There is no holder of the thing and no thing itself. It is one sculpture. There is no border between the different parts; energy flows from one to the other. But this has also changed over time. In my earlier work, the distinction between pedestal and sculpture was perhaps more obvious. Now the separation between sculpture and enclosure is gone. Creating that structure or enclosure was a way to create and occupy a space that would belong, in a way, to the sculpture and maybe protect it a bit... But I never saw the object and its pedestal as independent.

Tobias Putrih: My interest is primarily focused on process, on the circumstances in which the production of new things takes place. As artists, we want to produce sculptures, objects, things, and we need a certain excuse, a specific context that makes this activity possible. An economy of observing, making, showing, storing, and collecting plays a crucial role in the final decision that determines what we encounter inside the museum and what in turn influences our production. It means we see things that fit into the system of production and display; we are influenced by them and, at the same time, we want to push and expand the barriers of that same environment. It's about the continuous creation of trends as well as the struggle to overcome them. My tactics of overcoming lately include mimicking the process of product design and prototyping. This process tries to develop an idea into an object ready for use or even ready to be mass-produced. My "product" usually ends up being quasi-architectural space and quasi-functional furniture. Within the art context, this is called a "display structure."

GIVEN THIS SHARED PREOCCUPATION, I WONDER, HOW MUCH DO YOU THINK ART IS CONSTRUCTED BY THE RITUAL OF ITS DISPLAY?

TD: I don't think that what you are talking about is a conscious preoccupation of mine. I am not aware how people approach my work or what they get from the artwork or the display around it. In any case, I'm not strategic about it. But something about the way a thing is displayed might invite or provoke a certain kind of interaction. As a result of that, the artwork can even be changed or broken, and though I might have to overcome my anger about it, this action might fulfill the process of the artwork itself. A sculpture dictates its own needs.



From top:
Tobias Putrih & MOS
Intervention #10, 2009
Installation view, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, 2009
Photo: Florian Holzherr

Tobias Putrih
Mudam's space for public activities, Luxembourg, 2006
(in collaboration with Sancho Sivila)

All images courtesy: Galerija Gregor Podnar, Berlin / Ljubljana







Previous page, from top:
Thea Djordjadze
Untitled, 2010
Courtesy: kaufmann repetto,
Milan

Thea Djordjadze
"Explain away, ...," exhibition
view, Sprüth Magers,
Berlin, 2009
© Thea Djordjadze / VG Bild-
Kunst, Bonn 2009

This page:
Thea Djordjadze
*To be with those I like is
enough*, 2010
Installation view, castillo/
corrales, Paris, 2010
Photo: Peter Clastres



TP: It's easier to answer how much art is *not* constructed by the rituals of its display. I think it was an aging Renoir who told his young son, a film director, that there are artists who work around one and the same idea all their life, and there are other artists who don't deal with ideas at all. Through such a generalized view, abstract ideas would remain unaffected by the display. But everything else is the result of the economy and politics of showing, explaining, and exchanging.

I HAVE THE SENSE THAT DESPITE MAKING THINGS THAT OCCUPY GIVEN SPACES, IT IS THE SPACE *ITSELF*—THE EXHIBITION SPACE OR VIEWING SPACE—THAT TAKES ON A SPECIAL IMPORTANCE FOR YOU BOTH. THEA, I NOTICED, FOR INSTANCE, THE WAY YOU SOMETIMES USE A MIXTURE OF WATER AND PLASTER TO PAINT THE WINDOWS OF THE SPACES THAT YOU SHOW IN. YOU DID THIS TO A MASSIVE

the site. Using plaster on the windows is, in a way, related to that; it's about wanting to make the window part of the space and the space part of the sculpture.

IT SEEMS TO ME THAT THAT THE BODY OF THE SPECTATOR (AND I DON'T MEAN SOME IDEALIZED, ABSTRACT, OR CARTESIAN BODY, BUT INSTEAD A MORE CARNAL BODY) IS QUITE IMPORTANT TO YOUR THINKING AND ART-MAKING. TOBIAS, FOR YOU THIS IS SOMETIMES LITERALIZED IN THE WAYS IN WHICH YOUR SCULPTURES DEMAND INTERACTION AND ACTIVATION. AND THEA, EVEN THOUGH YOUR SCULPTURES AREN'T NECESSARILY MEANT TO BE TOUCHED OR ACTIVATED IN THE SAME WAY, THE VIEWER'S BODY IS IMPLICATED BY THE WAY YOUR SCULPTURES SIT OR STAND, WHICH SOLICITS A DIFFERENT KIND OF VIEWING THAN DISINTERESTED CONTEMPLATION.



This page:
Tobias Putrih
Šiška, International, 2010
Installation view, Centre
Pompidou, Paris, 2010
Photo: Georges
Meguerditchian
© Centre Pompidou,
Paris, 2010

Next page:
Tobias Putrih
Venetian, Atmospheric, 2007
Installation view, 52nd Venice
Biennial, San Servolo, 2007
Photo: Michele Lamanna
Courtesy: Galerija Gregor
Podnar, Berlin / Ljubljana

WINDOW OF THE NEUE NATIONALE GALERIE WHEN YOU SHOWED YOUR WORK THERE FOR THE 5TH BERLIN BIENNALE, AND ALSO, MORE RECENTLY, AT THE CASTILLO/CORRALES SPACE IN PARIS. TOBIAS, THE SAME COULD BE SAID OF YOUR ALTERATION OF THE SPACES IN WHICH YOU SHOW. FOR INSTANCE, FOR YOUR CONTRIBUTION TO THE 2008 VENICE BIENNALE, YOU PLACED WOODEN SLATS IN FRONT OF THE WINDOWS OF THE SLOVENIAN PAVILION... OFTEN THESE ALTERATIONS ARE THE ARTWORK. WHERE IS THE LINE BETWEEN THE OBJECT AND THE ROOM IT FINDS ITSELF IN?

TP: A confusing and quite interesting transition happens in a museum lobby or the entrance to an art gallery. I think a lobby is the crucial place where the dynamics of transition define the experience of the space that follows. That's why movie theaters are interesting. The whole space—ticket entrance, foyer, auditorium—is about a gradual transition into nothing, into the pure light of the screen projection. In the museum, the situation is similar; it's about a transition as well, about finding a way *toward* what we believe is "art." But there is hardly a line where art actually starts.

TD: I usually finish my sculptures only at the last moment and often in the exhibition space itself, so that the objects relate in some way to

TP: Yes, that's why I wanted to deal directly with product design and the question of how much one must sacrifice function to arrive at the perfect form. This problem is not as simple as it seems because every good product design is slightly dysfunctional. Slightly dysfunctional objects force the body to adapt and this act of adaptation is exactly what makes design good—how successfully an alien object, through constant repetition, becomes part of normal interactions. Its lack of functionality, and perhaps the allure of the form, pulls the user into an object-body symbiosis.

TD: I like the idea of sculpture as a gesture. Related to that is the body, of course—the body that made what you see and the body that sees what was made and that it has been *made* by someone. I'm interested in the urgency that drives something to be made and to be shown. I don't know how people engage with an artwork after that; I can only speak of how I engage with it, and for me, it's a very physical relationship. I am like that: When I am in a shop, I have to touch everything.

THEA, YOUR SCULPTURES SEEM TO ME TO PERSISTENTLY ACKNOWLEDGE THE BODILY GESTURES THAT IT TOOK TO MAKE THEM—YOUR WOBBLY FORMS, FINGERPRINTED SURFACES, AND IRREGULAR "HAND-MADE" EDGES SEEM ALMOST LIKE DOCUMENTS OF THE VERY MOVEMENT AND MAKING THAT MADE

THEM POSSIBLE. TOBIAS, YOUR WORKS COULD BE SEEN, CONVERSELY, AS ELIMINATING THAT HAND, SINCE THEY OFTEN SUGGEST SOMETHING SERIALLY OR INDUSTRIALLY PRODUCED, EVEN IF THEY ARE, IN FACT, MADE IN SMALL BATCHES AND ANYTHING BUT INDUSTRIAL...

TP: Most of my recent projects are about focusing on a process that starts with drawings and small models, and then slowly moves into a prototyping phase. This process of eliminating the hand is quite complex and difficult. It's like trying to teach a machine how to do something that it never did before. To reach perfect seriality takes a lot of effort. It's easy to just tweak existing processes of serial production or use standardized parts—that's what architecture and product design do in most cases—but it's another story if you want to generate purely experimental design, starting from scratch.

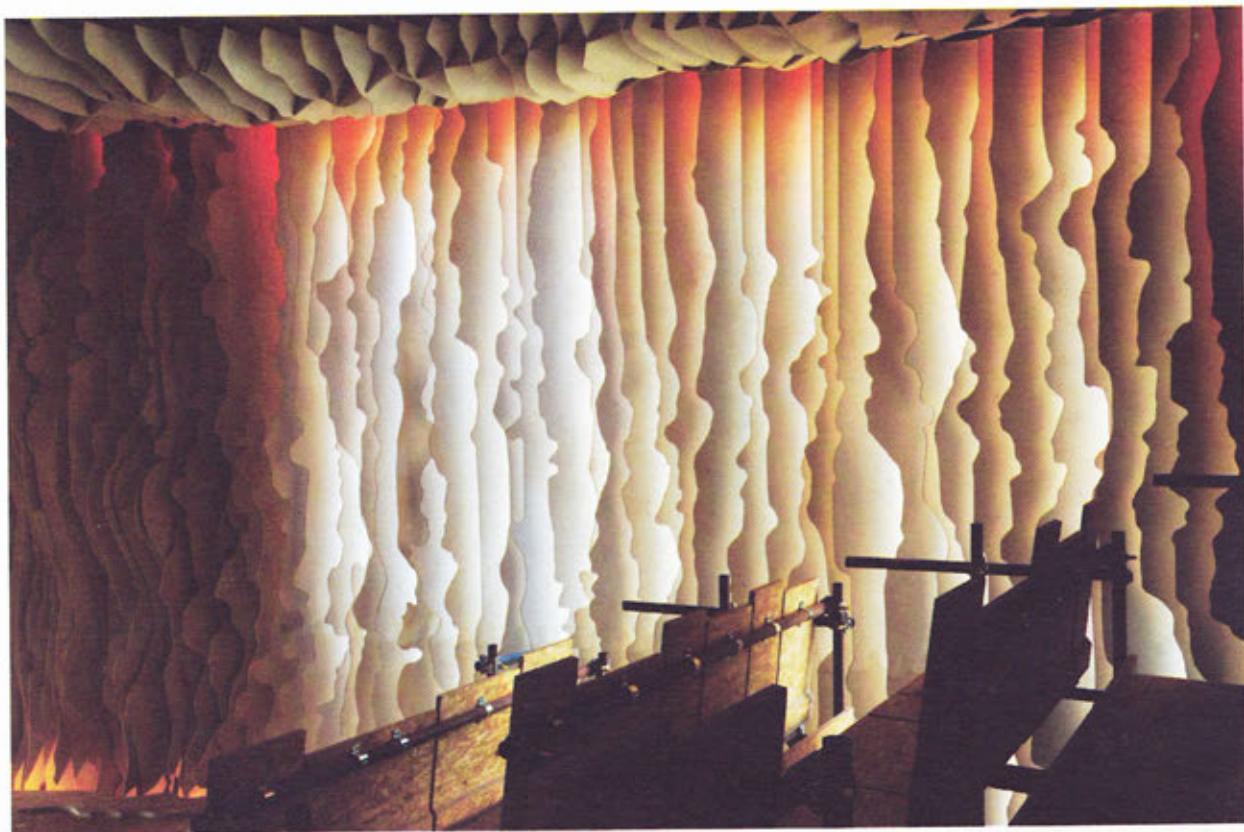
TD: Earlier you asked about why I had covered the windows in different exhibition spaces and I told you that it was about bringing space and sculpture together, but it was also a

ABOUT THIS COLUMN

In every issue, ELENA FILIPOVIC couples two artists who share an affinity or a rivalry—in terms of topics, approach or sensibility—and invites them to participate in a crossinterview, seeking out the surprise of a successful match.

AUTHOR

ELENA FILIPOVIC is curator at WIELS Contemporary Art Centre, Brussels. She was co-curator, with Adam Szymczyk, of the 5th Berlin Biennial, "When Things Cast No Shadow" (2008). She is also currently guest curator of the Satellite Program for emerging artists at the Jeu de Paume, Paris (2009–11) and co-editor of *The Biennial Reader: Anthology on Large-Scale Perennial Exhibitions of Contemporary Art*.



very physical gesture. For me, that physicality, that gesture, is what sculpture is about at its deepest or most essential level. Painting the windows of the Neue Nationalgalerie was a very physical moment, almost like lovemaking.

IN RECENT YEARS, THE IDEA OF REFERENTIALITY IN ART HAS COME UNDER ATTACK, EVEN IF THE USE OF REFERENCES USED TO BE A POLEMICAL ACT, AN ACKNOWLEDGEMENT THAT ARTISTIC PRACTICE DID NOT EMERGE *EX NIHILO* AND COULD INSTEAD BE A WAY TO CRITICALLY RE-EXAMINE THE PAST. HOW DO THE REFERENCES YOU USE IN YOUR WORK FUNCTION FOR YOU?

TP: Avoiding a reference requires a certain confidence in the system of representation and interpretation. Conversely, direct and open referencing neutralizes every external, accidental view on the project. A project that includes its own interpretation and attaches its representation to some sort of research seems like it's striving to create an

autonomous position. In that sense, I think in most cases referencing is an act of critique; it's a tool and, as such, it offers countless ways of engagement. My own use of references frequently functions as just another narrative layer, a membrane that connects parts and keeps the projects in some sort of connection with the past and present.

IN YOUR CASE, THEA, I WAS THINKING ABOUT REFERENTIALITY WITH REGARD TO YOUR TITLES. WHERE DO THEY COME FROM?

TD: Sometimes a line from a poem or another piece of writing becomes part of a title of an artwork, but for me, the titles are always separate—they sit *alongside* the artwork, but they are not part of it. At the Kunsthalle Basel, I decided on the thirteen titles for the thirteen pieces in the show, but then didn't attach any single title to any particular work. Instead, the visitors could decide which title went with which piece. The titles and the works were present next to each other, but disconnected. ♦