

Select the Right Location by Anna Moreno
A review by Katerina Gregos

Over the years, the multi-disciplinary practice of Anna Moreno has consistently explored the relationship of art to politics, activism, democracy and civil rights and the role of art as a vehicle of social change. Central to her concerns are the questions of ideology and human behaviour. Her work - which assumes different forms such as performance, video, photography, and installation - deploys various collaborative or collective practices - probes both the ethics and aesthetics of artistic social engagement, as well as its mechanisms and efficacy. "Select the Right Location" is a new project consisting of a play (shot in video) that is part of a wider project-in-progress called "The Barnum Effect", whose title is inspired by P. T. Barnum, the American circus king, entertainer, and first show business entrepreneur millionaire. Barnum authored several books including "The Art of Money Getting" (1880) where he outlines his golden rules for making money. Each work in "The Barnum Effect" borrows a title from one of the chapters of this book (these, indicatively, include 'The Art of Money Getting', 'Don't Mistake Your Vocation', 'Don't Get Above Your Business', and 'Learn Something Useful', among others)

"Select the Right Location" is the most recent one. In psychology, the term 'Barnum Effect' refers to the gullibility of people when reading descriptions of themselves, i.e. the fact that they will give high accuracy ratings to descriptions of their personality that are supposedly construed specifically for them, but are in fact vague and could apply, equally, to many other people. The term transpired due to Barnum's famous dictum "there's a sucker born every minute" and, by extent, this gullibility is exploited by many a capitalist ventures. Moreno's project deploys Barnum's statements, shifting them from an economic context into an artistic one, and subsequently exploring the link between art and its economy, the role of the artist in society and the economic system, the question of immaterial labour (considering the fact that the artist is one of the archetypal post-Fordist, cognitive labourers).

The plot of "Select the Right Location" revolves around five characters, all artists representing different positions in the art world, who seek refuge on the rooftop of a contemporary art museum after a city has flooded. Each one of them saves a valuable object from the disaster. While they wait for the flood to subside, they speak about their past and present predicament, and reflect both on art's (and their own) position in society. Three of characters in the play are identified by numbers (1, 2 and 4), and two have names (Vladimir and O.). The former represent stereotypes while the latter's names are culled from specific references including Stephan Dillemath's lecture transcript *A Hard Way to Enlightenment*, which considers the options of a fine artist with

regard to a changing public sphere, and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* which also hints to the general mood of the whole play, where not much happens, but a lot of pertinent subjects and issues are raised and discussed. As in Beckett's play "Select the Right Location" is also about symbiosis, and the dynamics of co-existence under absurd or bizarre circumstances.

Characteristically, the museum occupies the site of a formerly degraded urban area, and was built in order to regenerate the area and promote 'creativity' among the lower classes, an intentional contradiction. We however, never really see this museum. The video of the play is shot in front of a green Chroma background, thus requiring the active imagination of the viewers who have to conceive of the location and the surrounding deluge in their minds. The final piece will take the form of a video installation: a film version of the play, the script and the objects. These include a reproduction of a pagan idol (indicating a fetish – object to be venerated, an embodiment of the 'Other'), an amateur radio station (the only really useful object in the play, alluding to the issue of social efficacy), a small DIY Foucault's pendulum (symbolizing the fact that no matter how bad the situation, the world keeps turning), a record by The Smiths featuring the song *Ask* (which blatantly advocates violence to further change), and a collection of merchandising from the '92 Olympic games of Barcelona (which suggest commercialization and marketing as well as a commodified nostalgia for the past). These objects are displayed and used during the film, as well as displayed in the exhibition space.

Much of the action is focused on the state of waiting. As the artists wait for the storm to pass, they ponder on their present and future situation and speculate on several plans of action, each of which is in tandem with the characters' personality traits, and some of which contradict each other. In the end, sensing both an artistic and social impasse, it transpires that the occupation of the museum becomes the only alternative, and the artists decide to stay. However this occupation is neither active nor violent but, rather, passive, representative of a benign or compromising neutrality or an inability to act, what could also be seen as a case of *interpassivity*. Interpassivity is a term coined by Austrian philosopher Robert Pfaller which is considered as the opposite to "interactivity". It entails "a delegated pleasure or consumption" and is a symptom of our networked, technology-driven society, where we experience things second hand or mediated through technological apparatus. It refers to withdrawing from the responsibility of engaging and relying on something else or 'Other' to do it for us. One example is, for example, the museum talking head sets, which are supposed to mediate the exhibition, but very often one tends to gloss over the artworks, listening only to the text which in effect tells you what to think, thus removing the possibility of forming one's own thoughts or drawing ones own conclusions. Political engagement today, also increasingly takes place under these conditions, through on-line petitions and social networks, which do not always result in direct change but offer a sense of 'involvement'. In this writer's view,

interpassivity suits the neo-liberal order perfectly since it contains an element of withdrawal and avoids direct interaction or conflict.

This is but one of the complex questions raised in the play. Is interpassivity, for example, the only radical position to adopt today, as Slavoj Žižek argues, or is it does it simply reinforce the current impasse? In general, the question of passivity and, by extent, the passive critique engaged by the art world is another recurrent theme as are other questions that are being much debated of late such as: Does art have a responsibility towards society? Can and should art contribute to social change and if so how? Can or should art 'change the world? Can it be 'useful' and if so what precisely is its 'use'. Is it possible to adopt a radical position today, given the institutionalization and commercialization of practically everything? What of the ethics of the art market and the complicity of the art world with financial power? The play outlines several positions and contradictions simultaneously and contains a critique on the self-serving navel-gazing of the art world, which preaches but does not necessarily practice high-minded ideals. It also talks about and critiques the incessant need for economic justification of culture and the economic criteria towards which everything is increasingly subjected, as well the precarious nature of artistic labour. It alludes to the current disillusionment with the notion of democracy, the systemic passivity of citizens, the possibilities or limits of resistance, and the increasing abdication of civic responsibility and political engagement which are traded for consumerist comforts (substitutes for the curtailment of civil liberties and other freedoms). Finally, it puts into the question the role of the museum. Is the museum a real safe haven or is it redundant, cut off from society and its problems? Though they play reflects the general socio-economic and ideological malaise of our neo-liberal age of globalization, it does not take a position – that is up to the viewer to adopt – rather, it exposes the entanglements between art, money and politics and the often double standards and hypocrisy underlying this relationship as well as outlining the different ideological positions that exist within this system.

“Select the Right Location” is a deepening of Moreno’s ongoing preoccupation the way art deals politics, activism and direct action which already manifested itself in projects such as, more recently, “Radical Colophon”, a live discursive held in a constantly changing space at W139, Amsterdam earlier this year as well as other chapters in “The Barnum Effect”. Her work is representative of an increasing current preoccupation with the concepts of the ‘use’ and ‘value’ of art today, its position and role in contemporary society and related questions of money and market, versus political and social content and intent. What is the value of art today, in non-monetary terms? Why do we need it and what do we expect from it? Is it possible to disentangle art from the dominant forces of the market and its increasing commercialization and bureaucratic professionalization? Can art still have a revolutionary power able to counteract the forces of capital and the political status quo? In that sense, Moreno’s oeuvre is very close to a host of critical – performative practices which deal with similar issues of

economy, collectivity and ideology such as Chto Delat, Wendelien Van Oldenborgh, Nicoline Van Harskamp, Marinella Senatore, and Goldin+Senneby, to mention a few examples.

In the end, "Select the Right Location" transcends the problematics of the culture field and latently but eloquently translates the unease which so many people around the world are feeling, in the aftermath of the optimism of Occupy and the Arab Spring; it expresses the disillusionment that has permeated the field of culture in Europe with the budget cuts; it expresses the frustration of concerned citizens who are angry at the loss of civil liberties and social rights but who do not know how to react against the economic and political status quo. And it points to the dichotomy of the art world which is split between that faction that subscribes to the market, and that which still blows the trumpet of leftist ideals, while ignoring a certain complicity with commercial or institutional structures that ensure its survival. Ultimately, the final question that is raised is how do we re-define the role of art in times of uncertainty and crisis? Because one thing is certain: neither playing handmaiden to the market, nor passively critiquing the ills of society seems to be enough right now.

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Katerina Gregos is a curator and writer, based in Brussels. She has curated numerous major international exhibitions, including most recently: *The Politics of Play* for the the 7th Göteborg Biennial (Sweden, 2013), *Liquid Assets: In the Aftermath of the Transformation of Capital*, Steirischer Herbst, Graz (Austria, 2013), *Newtopia: The State of Human Rights* (Mechelen & Brussels, 2012), and Manifesta 9, (Genk, 2012). In 2011 she curated *Speech Matters*, the Danish Pavilion at the 54th Venice Biennale, an internationally acclaimed group show on freedom of speech, and co-curated the 4. Fotofestival Mannheim Ludwigshafen Heidelberg, Germany. Currently, she is also a visiting lecturer at HISK – The Higher Institute of Arts, Gent. Forthcoming projects for 2014 include No Country for Young Men: Contemporary Greek Art in Times of Crisis for the Palais de Beaux Arts (BOZAR), Brussels (2014).