Real Artists Don’t Have Teeth

2009
Performed by
Johannes Tunn
Installation view:
‘La Insuficiencia.
Lo Inadecuado.
The Inadequate’
Spanish Pavilion,
54th Venice Biennale
2011
Notes & Queries

The collaborations and performances of Dora García, who is currently representing Spain in the Venice Biennale, engage with radicalism, inadequacy and the excluded by Max Andrews

Dora García’s art of the last several years deliberately refuses an overview; like Herman Melville’s scribe Bartleby, it ‘prefers not to’ conform to expectations while specializing in a kind of plagiarism. As a James Joyce scholar proposes in The Inadequate (2011), one of two videos which form part of ‘L’inaugurado, Lo Inadequado, The Inadequate’, García’s project for the Spanish Pavilion at this year’s Venice Biennale, holding out for any attempt in the Irishman’s novels is futile. Instead, we’re destined to endlessly perpetuate readings and interpretations, to wonder or dance around them. Similarly, García’s recent work could be catalogued under the title of her series ‘Mist Marginal’ (2006–10); willfully inconclusive, it’s composed of a perpetual inquiry into, and recirculation of, the work of various misfit artists, writers, poets and comedians – ‘inadequate’ and volatile figures whom she admires for their singular indifference to success and convention. Taking the form of situations or performances which are more or less scripted, her works are often modified through their presentation or trigger loops of feedback. Repurposed for Venice, Instant Narrative (2006), for example, involves someone sitting with a laptop hooked up to a projector as they type a text describing the visitors’ behaviour in the Pavilion, a scribbler-surveyor situation, while Rehearsal/Retrospective (2010) comprised coaching about how to enact further performed pieces by García, including The Artist Without Works (2008), a speech in the form of a tour about artists who refuse to produce anything.

‘L’inadequado’ is an exasperating, accumulative performance-in-progress and partial retrospective which resists adding up to a ‘proper’ exhibition. Dialogues, more usually supplementary events to the institutional display of art, are the core content, and the entirety central arium of the Pavilion is taken up by a platform that hosts a multitude of conversations, monologues and presentations throughout the six months of the Biennale, which focuses on the Italian underground scene since the 1960s. Developed with the help of a team of collaborators including Marco Baravalle, Barbara Casavecchia, Eva Fábria, Peep-Hole gallery in Milan and Cesare Pietroiusti, and expanding to include almost 100 participants through the Biennale, the exhibition has grown into an unlicensed, regulated and undocumented research project which exercises and airs radical and marginal art, politics, literature, gay subculture and anti-psychiatry with their lines of inheritance alongside the position of the dissident, the excluded, the exiled, the unofficial and the obsessive. The ‘players’ who represent themselves and the work of others in this meticulous pavilion des enfants comprise novelists, philosophers, sociologists, activists, publishers, cinema directors, economists, curators, historians, psychiatrists, urbanists, architects and distinguished art veterans such as Gianfranco Baruchello and Nanni Balestrini. The ‘players’ who are represented by others – a small troupe of
actors incarnating characters in dialogue routines which run throughout the months of the Biennale – include the irrepressible filmmaker Turner-regular Jack Smith playing playwright, director and latterly psychiatric patient Antonin Artaud; and stand-up comedian and obesity-outlaw Lenny Bruce (all three characters in García’s one-man play Real Artaud Don’t Have Teeth, 2000), while the reading of Bruce’s routines also comprises the work entitled Censorship Just Because Everything is Different it Does Not Mean That Anything Has Changed, The Essential Lenny Bruce (2000), Charles Fleis, a bit-part beggar from Bertolt Brecht’s The Threepenny Opera (1928), whose incarnation through actors on the streets of Münster was García’s contribution to Sculptur Projekte Münster in 2007, also put in appearances.

Gilles Deleuze’s Essays Critical and Clinical (1997) is a collection of studies on writers and artists, some of whom might easily find a place in García’s panoply of real and impersonated characters – including Lewis Carroll, T.E. Lawrence and Alfred Jarry – under the conceit that evaluating the qualities of their ‘minor’ work is much like diagnosing a new rare disease. Not coincidentally, such affiliations would bear the name of the clinicians who first agree that a particular set of symptoms are meaningful. Likewise the Pavilion’s conglomeration of proper names, both known and unknown, and its equivalence of detail, similarity, recognition, and suffers from, yonemigious aesthetic positions – (Jack) Smith’s or (Lenny) Bruce’s Syndromes, perhaps. Correspondingly engaging and unlikely, ostentations and banal, trivial and profound, the project is thus an explicit defence of radicalism, dignity and truth, being comprised of critical analysis as well as being ‘had form’, and always something of a joke. Or, in other words, as the Garcia-designed T-shirt that accompanied an exhibition, which included works by Jack Smith and Guy de Cointet, that the artist co-curated this summer at Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Castilla y León – read: ‘Yes We Camp’.

Yet it is the story of the pioneering Venetian psychiatrist Francesco Basaglia that are the most contagious syndrome here. His vision to outlaw mental hospitals in Italy in favour of integrating ‘madness’ into society found profound echoes in his work as a director of the hospital in the city of Trieste in the 1970s. Basaglia’s articulation of the patient as a victim of the destructive institution offered García a framework for considering anti-deinstitutionalization, both in insane detail and through a dubious stance towards his own evident success and presence at the centre of the institution of art in the guise of the grandest biennale. By taking the maxim that the institution itself is that ‘an institution is something that does not change’, García’s accumulative occupation of the Pavilion instigated something akin to a deinstitutionalization of institutional critique as a form of practice only capable of producing a generalized aggression towards the fabric of the white cube. Instead, García’s dissent is not offering an easily digestible public entity with the expected obligations of legitimacy, justification, and her obvious doubts about the credibility of one artist representing Spain, was amplified through the Pavilion’s multi-author set-up, and the fact that, if representing anything, it far better stands for Italy. The case for inadequacy is further present in the fact that the central dialogue character, Switch, plays within his own text, but rather events in public – one can join in, but in order to participate rather than eavesdrop. They are purposely not positioned as lectures in need of an audience and, apart from the actors or García herself, it is unlikely that throughout the months of the Biennale anyone could experience more than a fragment of them. This unceremonious programmatic directness extends to the orchestration of the visitors and installation of the Pavilion, with nothing committed to the walls, folding chairs available as needed for talks or watching films, monitors on wheeled media trolleys as they might be in a media library rather than a gallery, and little or no artificial light, the emphasis is on the transparent and the pragmatic. Intervention light, suspicious of making itself at home in the Pavilion, the project avoids obligation to the building, declining to identify with its loaded territorial status.

The lateral spaces of the Pavilion contain archival material and props related to García’s recent works – including Fleis’s ephemera from The Beggar’s Opera (2002) – but moreover host an amazing array of loaned manuscripts, art, correspondence and photographs by a range of artists and writers whose work was unhindered when it was produced – a kind of reef of marginal practices and García’s web of research. These include facsimiles of the Swiss writer Robert Walser’s astonishing micro-skins; documents produced by Francesco Maratere and from the Ufficiale per l’Immaginazione Pleuristiana/International office of literary Liberation initiated in 1973 by Franco Falesca, Carlo Maurizio Benvenuti and Tulilio Catalano; reproductions of documents related to the time Joyce spent teaching English in Trieste; an archive of the dream of maximum security prisoners; letters sent at random to the Pavilion by the poet and graphic novelist Aide Pirollani; work by the Arte Povera black sheep Ennio Priti, whose participation in the 1968 laboratory-cum-exhibition ‘Il Teatro delle Mostre’ (Theatre of Exhibitions) was an early influence for the Pavilion, as well as the storage of films to be screened during discussions by Fabio Mauti and experimental cinema pioneer Alberto Grifi. Brilliant and self-consciously flawed, indulgent and maddeningly dispersive, ‘I’inadeguato’... deliberately neither functions to clearly convey information nor to entertain, yet is carried by García’s infectious commitment for the contents of her reluctant occupation.

The two documentary films that are casually presented on monitors in the corner space of the Pavilion crystalize many strands of García’s research through talking-head interviews, voice-over commentaries and films of workshops in psychiatric hospitals...

Dora García admires the work of various misfit artists, writers, poets and comedians for their indifference to success and convention.

Springing from work made in the context of the São Paulo Biennial in 2010, The Deviant Majority from Basaglia to Brazil traces the influence and legacy of Basaglia's work in Brazil. We see a psychiatric hospital theatre group acting out in present-day São Paulo: a role-playing patient/audience of addicts, women and men. A woman closely involved with the radical anti-psychiatric movement in the 1960s and 70s offers an amusing but revealing anecdote about a party in a, disabled ward in a Greek hospital supervised Franco Rotelli and Felix Guattari in which the latter could not bring himself to join in the dancing. In this episode, 'CR', witnesses what she disappointedly understands as the philosopher’s ultimate failure to put his ethics and aesthetics into practice.

Despite the near-invisibility of García’s name at almost every conventional point of artistic attribution, it is her willingness to choreograph the Pavilion as well as to dance herself – across the roles of artist, curator, Jan and impresario – which gives it traction and clout. García’s formidable radicalism-jamboree, and her care and enthusiasm for the anonymous and volatile heritage of recent Italian history, shares the poetical rhetoric of the Italian Pavilion and provides a timely context for considering the normalization of outrageousness, of genius, madness and the mirage of authentic art.

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Dora García lives in Barcelona, Spain. In 2010 her work was included in the 29th São Paulo Biennial and she had solo presentations at Oficina para Projetos de Arte A.C., Guadalajara, Mexico Kunsthalle Bern, Switzerland and Index Stockholm, Sweden. García represents Spain at the 54th Venice Biennale, which runs until 27 November.

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Middle row, right: Charles Fleis, A Lecture on Spaghetti Westerns, Real Rogues from Charles Fleis 2001

Bottom row: Dora García, Where Do Characters Go When the Story is Over? 2011.
