

Translating Cultural and Historical Values

On the Room-Filling Installations of Natalija Ribović and Toru Fujita

The question of the “Other” as an identity-forming constituent has been a crucial moment of reflection since Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytical studies of the 1960s and been taken up by the artistic discourse over the last twenty years. The latter poses the question whether it is still possible that the ubiquity of circulating pictures accomplishes the function of depicting reality, or whether the production of each image merely constitutes a manifestation of desire where, according to Lacan, reality itself only obtains a marginal position. In Lacan’s constantly reevaluated psychoanalytical approach, the perception of identity equals the reality represented through an image. Lacan exemplifies this when the subject perceives him/herself as an image in the mirror and when this representation becomes reverse and thus leads to the apprehension of the self as the “Other.”

While the question of the Other is predominately concerned with the identity of the self, it also opens up the layer of cultural representation and the translation of different cultural values. In Natalija Ribović’s drawings and her spatial installations with Toru Fujita, the question of language is always a crucial one, be it the Cyrillic letters of Ribović’s mother tongue Serbian/Ruthenian or that of her second language German. The poetic approach of Ribović’s textual works asks about the primary conditions of our identity and the ever-increasing global transfer not only of individuals but also of cultural traditions. The relation to the image as a non-adequate because subjective portrayal of reality becomes apparent in a decidedly fictional manner of storytelling, which combines three important characters: the grandmother as representative of nature, Giovanna as representative of the cosmos and the black rabbit as representative of technology. With these three elements, Ribović and Fujita bring together past, present and future on a very personal, almost cartoon-like scenario, which seems to take its cue from the extensive Manga tradition in Japan.

For their joint exhibition at Tokyo Wonder Site Hongo, Ribović and Fujita created a universe derived from room-filling struggles with matter, combining drawings, a giant black usagi (rabbit) made out of rubber, which seems to almost not fit into the space, lying on a multi-colored carpet made out of plastic tape that is supposed to symbolize a flying carpet. A paper box on the window shelf with music from the Balkans and a video in the very back of the room showing how the black rabbit visits the grandmother in Novi Sad, Serbia supplement the scene. With this multimedia installation, Ribović and Fujita create a world which is full of contradictions but where the contradictory forces do not necessarily have a bad effect on each other but are brought together in harmony through the *Octo_Hasi_Balkan_Picnic*. The picnic symbolizes a unity of cultural signifiers without borders in a territorial as well as mental sense.

Coming from the Balkan region in Eastern Europe, Ribović highlights this part of her identity as a symptom for the Other inside herself, which is at the same time bound to a cultural myth without an exact spatial localization. Mythology locates the Balkans in Transsylvania, the place where Dracula lived, which would most likely be situated in today’s Romania. Yet the mythical question of positioning the Balkans has something to do with a certain sinister and at the same time laissez-faire lifestyle, which has been attributed to the countries in South-Eastern Europe from different perspectives. For Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, the location of the Balkans is very closely connected to the question of the Other, which is always something outside oneself. Hence, if asked where the Balkans start, people from Northern Germany would say in Southern Germany, whereas there one would locate their geographical origin in Austria. In Austria, however, people would say that the Balkans starts in Slovenia, and there they are shifted further to Croatia, Serbia, and so on and so forth. From a Japanese position, it is difficult to grasp all these nuances of continuously shifting political and mental borders, which, for an island with only one natural border – the sea – has never really been an issue at stake. Yet, after more than one hundred years of political, cultural and technological exchange between Japan and the rest of the world, there have been a lot of influences from Europe and the U.S., which transformed Japan into one of the most advanced societies of the present. Ribović and Fujita address Japanese professionalism represented through technology in the figure of the black rabbit. The rabbit symbolizes progress and future, which are expressed through the innovation and perfection of its making. The flying carpet underneath is another element of Ribović and Fujita’s artistic fables, which brings the rabbit to Eastern Europe in the video, where a totally different lifestyle predominates the scene.

Intertwining different cultural narratives in a myriad of stories, mixed media and languages lies at the heart of Ribović and Fujita’s artistic approach, which takes up the Other from within to erase contradictory notions of cultural difference or failure. The position of the globalized subject arises through the imposition of language and the respect paid to each form of cultural articulation, which engenders a democratic vision of the subject in a place without borders that would otherwise be restrictive or provisional. Hence, the work combines both European and Japanese values which are tried into a unique style of culturally significant elements such as the Manga inspired drawings or the technology-based appropriations of the rabbit. With *Octo_Hasi_Balkan_Picnic*, it becomes clear that Ribović and Fujita are interested in a world where different influences resonate without the conflicting potential of borders or mental barriers.