

LIQUOR AMNII: An International Collaboration

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By the Waters

By Malgosia Askanas

Photos by Bob Raymond

On June 20, 1997, I went to Providence to see an installation/performance event called Liquor Amnii 2 (LA2). This event constituted the second part of a collaborative project involving five women artists from Skopje, Macedonia. The first part of Liquor Amnii took place in the summer of 1996 at the Skopsko Leto Arts Festival. The Providence event, which completed the project, was part of the Convergence X International Arts Festival.

In the LA2 program notes, Suzana Milevska wrote: "The title, Liquor Amnii, a liquid that points to maternity as the most female differentia specifica, can be understood in much broader terms, as a metaphor for the boundary between self and Other, taking account of our complex relations toward cultural, sexual and religious Otherness. Amniotic fluid is what is in-between mother (object) and child (subject), but at the same time it splits them apart and designates the mother as a guarantee for the subjectivization of the child."

The site of Liquor Amnii 2 was a one-block section of Riverwalk Park, a promenade which runs along both sides of the Providence River. The section extended from the College Street Bridge to the Crawford Street Bridge. Those who strolled into it would find, prominently available, an overview map and an extensive description of the history and concerns of the project as a whole, the individual contributions to, and linkages between, the two parts of the project, and information on the concerns and histories of the participating artists. LA2 also included an exhibit of documentation from the Macedonian half of the project. One might say that through these documents, the 10 artists declared the LA2 area to be under a temporary territorial claim, and themselves its cultivators, planters, transformers.

THE WALK UNDER THE COLLEGE STREET BRIDGE

Iskra Dimitrova

"Double - Femina Alba"

Hidden under the bridge is a small white huddled cast figure standing in the water, hugging its knees, reminiscent of both "The Thinker" and a fetus, gently rocking back and forth with the water. After dark, the figure is lit by a spectral blue light.

From under the bridge comes the continuous sound of multi-voiced staccato singing. It is insistent, strident, and can be heard from far away.

ON THE GREEN

Meredith Davis

"Bird Woman"

The Bird Woman's nest is a domestic arrangement under a tree. On a rough wooden table, a giant slab of roasted meat. Around it, on the grass, grapevine branches stripped of bark, intertwined with the table legs, preventing access. Branches are also draped around the tree that shades the table. Nearby, broken twigs form an elliptical vagina-like heap.

The Bird Woman moves in small increments. She wears layers of antique clothes, tatters, netting, feathers in feather-like hair. Barefoot. She carries a feather duster, a net-bag with stuff; she drags behind her a large piece of netting which she sometimes tries to attach to trees. She pecks at things. Her head makes little shaking motions. She patiently repeats the same meaningless gestures, as if trying to accomplish some unidentified everyday task. Sometimes she puts on yellow rubber gloves. Obsession and dementia of a world reduced to small domesticities. A combination of bag woman, squatter and housewife.

Mari Novotny-Jones

"Along the Rivers of Babylon"

She's wearing a dress of stones - slate and marble tiles - and in her hair, as if curlers, are blocks of limestones. She's pushing around a shopping cart with pieces of slate, a triple candlestick. She accosts passers-by, complaining of a headache, whispering into their ears, obsessively imparting pieces of knowledge about the history of the slave-trade and of witch-hunts: how many barrels of rum was the price of a female slave? what used to go in the old civic buildings surrounding the green? She passes out pieces of slate from her cart, first writing on them with chalk shorthand memos to capture these facts.

BACK TO THE RIVERWALK

Zaneta Vangeli

"The Constant Desire for Eternity"

Two parallel stretches of red carpet cover the steps leading down to the water. As one descends to the water's edge, a gold plaque with the inscription "The Constant Desire for Eternity," is flanked by two poles with American flags. Floating on the water, a flock of red life-preservers.

Marilyn Arsem

"Rivers of Memory: Oceans"

On a stone terrace jutting out into the river, an ice chamber, furnished with a throne-like high chair and a bench made of ice, both covered with red pillows. The chair and the bench face each other. On the floor between them, an ornamented pitcher, a mound of ice, bowls, strainers, baskets. The chair stands with its back to the walk, facing the river. Arsem in a long ice-gray dress is inhabitant and hostess. The visitor is invited to sit in the chair. The back of the chair is very cold. The ice is continually melting. Arsem squats on the floor next to the visitor; they converse quietly and intimately. "Do you want to hold your past?" she asks. She pours water from the pitcher into a bowl, scoops some up with her joined palms and transfers it carefully into the visitor's palms. Or perhaps one can hold one's past by holding onto a handful of ice from the ice mound? Is it really the visitor's past, or is it mixed

together with other pasts? If mixed, perhaps it can be separated out; the tools - the strainers and baskets - are on hand. If separated, perhaps it needs to be mixed again by being poured into the river, into which all other pasts flow.

Nora Stojanovic

"Gathering Scales of the Big Fish (Missing PartsÖ)"

The end of this section of the Walk has been transformed into a small outdoor performance space. The flowerbed by the wall has been covered with plastic, and looks like a clumpy couch eternally encased in a protective sheath. On it is a layer of crude salt and a number of huge dead fish. To the right, 3 video monitors and a projection screen. Semi-transparent harmonica-like plastic tubes - perhaps heating ducts? - are draped between and over things.

After dark, the performance begins. On the projection screen appears a close-up of a woman repeatedly immersing herself under water and coming up for breath. This image persists through the performance, establishing a central rhythm - the breathing action of the piece itself. To the left, on a wall covered with blue tiles, a quick-changing slide show of what looks like images from old women's magazines, hunks of meat from butcher shops, the American flag, stills from old Hollywood movies. The projector light on the blue tiles makes the space feel like the inside of an aquarium. On the video monitors appear images of an immobile young woman, wrapped in a white sheet, sitting on the edge of a large tub inside a shop with windows facing a bustling street.

A slender naked figure saran wrapped from head to toe is led into the performance space and lies down on the salt couch among the dead fish. There is the constant sound of water and breathing. The woman on the video unwraps her body from the sheet and slides down into the tub. We see that it is an aquarium teeming with large fish. The video switches to crates of dead fish and we realize that the immersion act took place in a fish store. The woman stays in the aquarium for a while, immersing herself under water and coming up for breath. Then she gets out, wraps the sheet around herself and leaves. The whole video sequence keeps being replayed, in a kind of fugue, on the three monitors, while the saran-wrapped figure continues to lie among the salt and fish, sometimes slightly changing position, and the breathing-image and slide projection continue on the projection screen and the tile wall.

UNDER THE CRAWFORD STREET BRIDGE

Mirna Arsovska

"Mental Landscapes in Samples and Textures"

Placed on the bridge's foundation, under its arches, are 3 Lucite display cases, each lit from below by a light. Seen from the shore, the middle one seems to contain a number of unidentifiable objects while the two others seem empty. There is a telescope on the shore for examining them more closely, but my own attempt at examination was not very successful: now the vision, instead of being too distant, was too close and fragmentary. The pieces seem to have been placed so as to form a small gallery display meant especially to be seen from boats passing under the bridge.

ON THE CRAWFORD STREET BRIDGE

Margarita Kiselicka-Kalajdzievska

"Timelessness"

A semi-cylindrical booth made of simulated sandstone stands on the bridge's south

sidewalk, with its rounded back to the roadway and its front facing the river. The front has a window. Looking through it, the viewer sees herself reflected in two mirrors placed inside the booth: one vertical and facing the viewer, the other horizontal and lining the bottom of the booth's inside. Between the viewer and the back mirror is a vertical frame of raw wood, like a picture-frame, which frames a small carved wooden object, resembling a dancing spindle and a braided root. Thus, as the viewer sees herself looking in, the objects inside the booth, and their multiple reflections, juxtapose themselves between the viewer and her mirrored double. The viewer views herself across a distance of repeated, reflected realities and illusions. Since the window faces the river, the river landscape enters the reflection, and is reflected both in the inner mirrors and in the windowpane. These reflections are slightly discontinuous with each other in tint, precision, and spatial positioning.

JUST SOUTH OF CRAWFORD STREET

Margaret Tittlemore (with Nora Stojanovic)

"Across the Waters"

Across the river from each other stand two gigantic wooden chairs. At 7:15 p.m., when the performance is scheduled to start, Tittlemore and Stojanovic are by the chairs, trying to talk to each other by shouting across the river. Stojanovic is speaking through a bullhorn which, she says, she has found inside her chair; she's encouraging Tittlemore to look inside hers. Tittlemore, too, finds a bullhorn; the younger woman, from across the river, guides her in how to use it. Then Stojanovic wants to take off; she doesn't want them to stay in place, but, instead, to wander along the river and explore what's going on. The older woman resists: is this the right thing to do, she wonders? Stojanovic forces the issue by beginning to walk. Is their conversation pre-arranged? We, the audience, don't know.

ON THE WEST SIDE OF THE RIVER

Cathy Nolan

"Chespy"

Nolan, dressed to her nines as if for a prom or a wedding - blue silk gown, pearl necklace, white gloves and high-heeled pumps - is on the shore, pulling with a rope a barge on the river. The barge is outfitted like a bridal bed, with gauzy white curtains and garlands of ivy, white roses, lilies-of-the-valley. In the center, in place of the bed itself, is an open coffin, empty except for its lining of romantic 5-penny prints: lovers by a lake, handsome Victorian men, etc. The barge is heavy and tends to get stuck in the bridge supports. It does not want to go anywhere. Nolan labors heroically at getting it to move, at keeping it moving. Occasionally she enlists the help of passers-by.

threads

FUTILE LABOR

This was a thread that ran explicitly through all the American performances. Novotny-Jones is burdened by stone dress and stone headgear, pushing around stones in a shopping cart. Nolan, in party dress and high heels, pulled a heavy boat up and down the river. Tittlemore and her partner tried to communicate from opposite sides of the river. Davis as "Bird Woman" was enmeshed in endless, tiny, repetitive bird-chores. And Arsem worked demonstrating failed captures of an uncapturable past.

but it was also present, in subtler and more ironic forms, in the Macedonian pieces. In "The Constant Desire for Eternity," the red carpet and the pomp led to a

nowhere whose nowhere-ness was ameliorated by the provision of life preservers. In "Mental Landscapes," the details could not be ascertained by the viewers even with the aid of a telescope. In "Gathering the Scales" the repetitive effort of trying to breathe in an environment in which she is not equipped for breathing. In "Timelessness," all one ultimately saw was oneself looking. In "Double," the incessant rocking of the figure on the water reflected the ubiquitous repetitiveness of the music. The figure itself was in a birth position, but never really born.

THE ART OBJECT AS AN AUTONOMOUS (OR NOT) CREATION

The Macedonian pieces represented an approach to art in which art's meaning and effectiveness is tightly bound with the artist's meaning and effectiveness is tightly bound with the artist's expertise in transforming raw materials into self-sufficiency and self-perfection. Their potential for disclosure is predicated on the viewer's engagement with the object as an art object and bring to bear the culture's traditions and accumulated competencies concerning such engagements. The link to the past here is a link to the history of art as a cultural realm whose social role is inextricable from the artwork's very specific claims to autonomy.

In the approach represented by the American pieces, the meaning of the artwork derives from its embeddedness in, and continuity with, everyday life. The artist creates events which are almost indistinguishable from ordinary actions and occurrences: wanderings of bagwomen, putterings of housewives, communications between workers on different ends of a construction site, attempts to carry around too much luggage. The art feeds on the ambiguity between intentional "performance" and normal living, but also on the selective heightenings and exclusions which stamp it as art and frame its perception. It would, however, be overly simplistic to insist on a strict dichotomy between these approaches. Irrespective of whether the art insinuates itself into the viewer's life as continuous with the everyday or as something "autonomous," it nevertheless winds up in the stream of the viewer's life and concerns. In LA2, this was both heightened and symbolized by the fact that each piece, irrespective of its overall approach, was a part of the environment of the Riverwalk. Intentionally or unintentionally, it transacts business not only with the viewers, but also with the river, the street, the street-life, the buildings, the boats, the city. And as Davis' wanderings as Bird Woman fused themselves into normal traffic on the green, so did the Crawford Street Bridge fuse itself, through reflection, into Kiselicka-Kalajdziewska's "Timelessness," and the flow of water under the College Street Bridge into Dimitrova's "Double."

PERFORMANCES FOR AN AUDIENCE OF ONE

Most of the Mobius performances at LA2 involved, in a central way, personal one-on-one interactions between the artist and individual passers-by. This is a line of thinking which some Boston artists, such as Marilyn Arsem and Ron Wallace, have been pursuing for a number of years. It focuses on developing performances geared towards an audience of one, i.e. presented separately, and differently, to individual recipients. Examples include a work in which Wallace accompanies one person at a time on a 15-mile walk through a Boston park system, and Arsem's Red in Woods, in which the solitary person is directed to a spot in wintry forest and asked to follow clues - some pre-planted, others involving live actions by performers.

This line of thinking puts radical stress on performance's nature as a service or gift offered by one person to another. It questions or negates the idea of artistic self-

expression as an emanation of the supposedly autonomous being of the artist; it also, obviously, refuses a certain type of spectacle and notions of artistic economies of scale. On the other hand, an interesting aspect of the LA2 one-on-one performances was their theatricality, the fact that the performer played a specific persona and interacted with the audience in costume and character.

ECRITURE FEMININE

In the LA2 program notes, Suzana Milevska writes: "The project Liquor Amnii is an intercultural interweaving of different approaches toward a feminine art as writing in the manner of Cixous." I take this to be largely an encouragement towards a certain kind of meditation or reflection on the part of the viewer, rather than a proposal for a permanent taxonomy. So let me offer a short meditation in that vein.

Several of the artists - Novotny-Jones, Nolan, Davis, Stojanovic - can be said to have explicitly addressed themselves to "the social." It was striking that in all their pieces, this powerlessness was an act of sympathetic mimicry, of identification with the powerless, the driven into exile and dementia. In Nolan's piece, it was a metaphor for being burdened with the dead weight of disempowering feminine self-imagery and expectations.

In Stojanovic's case, "Gathering Scales of the Big FishÖ" the function of her central powerlessness seemed more complex. To the extent that the piece was about recollection, she was the passive receiver of the recollections, who was as if boud up in a dream. To the extent that the piece was about breathing and suffocation, the saran-wrapped body was a body out of the element in which it could breathe. From this perspective, one could interpret the slide projection as representing a foreign element into which the artist had suddenly been inserted and in which she had to learn to breathe, or come up for breath.

Why this artistic self-disempowerment? It is, of course, true - a truism, in fact - that women are oppressed, objectified, domesticated, infantilized, disempowered. But it would be hard to argue that the reason is some kind of forgetfulness on the part of society, a collective amnesia, that what is needed s a memory picture, a "Woman's Plight" mnemonic to remind society to put things to right. Instead, what seems necessary for ending these conditions of oppression is, on the one hand, an understanding of their functionings and functions, and on the other, an awareness on the part of women of our social role, our power; potential for solidarity, resistance, action; collective creativity. There is in our lives enough victimization and oppression; we should be reluctant, it seems to me, to victimize ourselves or others through art. Is not this artistic "strategy" merely a repetition and propagation of the ways of thinking and reacting which we desire to end? We are weighted down by enough stone dresses, pull enough useless ballast, are confronted with enough obstacles to free breathing - we do not need to use our artistic inventiveness to symbolically reproduce or multiply such conditions and impose them on ourselves. We need it for changing the world, for building the new.

HOME AND EXILE

Installing site-specific art is a form of homemaking, an act of transformation for the purpose of inhabiting. The red carpet in Vangeli's "The Constant Desire for Eternity" gave focus and direction to a set of stairs, transforming them into a narrative space in which each passer-by was seduced into physically claiming the collective drive to glory. On the other hand, the sense we make of the piece - the very process of sensemaking - is, of course, in equal measure a function of

distance, of the strangeness and unaccustomedness of what has been injected into the site. Arsovska's "Mental Landscapes" placed with this dialectic: the objects were too far away to form our home, but they seemed to be a perfect home for someone else, someone who might be passing in a boat. The telescope was there to eliminate this gap and bring us inside, but it destroyed too much distance and ultimately did not advance the task of making sense.

The analogy between artmaking and homemaking was explicitly thematized in Arsem's "Rivers of Memory" and Davis' "Bird Woman." Both of them literally made a home. In Arsem's piece, home was a place in which the viewer was invited to make herself at home, to enter a dialogue and a mutual gift-giving; but also a place of ice, always in the process of dissolving and flowing away with the river. In Davis' piece, home was a space made uninhabitable by obsessive collecting, by demented overcare. Bird Woman's wanderings were as much an eternal gathering expedition as they were a staying-away from a non-home, a testimonial of de-facto homelessness.

For half of the LA2 artists, the event implied making art in a foreign country. Thus, LA2 was in part a demonstration of art's potential for making a home anywhere. At the same time, there was a recurring theme of exile, wandering, homelessness, and a questioning of sense of place. Was this feature attributable to LA2's character of "écriture féminine?" To a self-perception on the part of artists as exiles and outsiders? To a general feeling of homelessness and exile among human beings in the late 20th century?

MAPS, TEXTS AND PROJECTS

Before I went to LA2, I received in the mail a package which extensively described the project, its history, and the content of its Macedonian part. Similar documentation and a map were available at the site.

I found myself thinking, more than usual, about the nature and role of these accompanying texts. For example: the event would have been different without a map. The map served to announce that what was being presented was a specific set of 10 pieces with well-defined locations, all meant to be found exactly where the map indicated. It communicated to the viewer the exact limits of the event; it announced that the event, although taking place outdoors on a public promenade, was meant neither to insinuate itself into the space nor to shock or confuse the viewer by the nature of the encounter. It also served to define the LA2 site as a site, to encourage its perception as a cohesive territory.

The descriptive texts were striking in their completeness. They contained not only detailed advance descriptions of what each piece would be, but, for some pieces, interpretive information which could not be gleaned from the piece itself - for instance, that the persona of Novotny-Jones' performance was Mary Magdalene.

In effect, the material elements of the event assumed the role of almost an appendage to the description - a material witness to its truth. So that, although LA2 took the form of 10 individual works situated in various points of the Riverwalk, I believe that it should not be thought of as a kind of outdoor gallery exhibit that presented together, in one space, various individual art pieces. Rather, what was being presented at LA2 was a project, in its trajectory from conception and intention to final implementation.

How does one, as a viewer, engage with a project? Is this kind of engagement different from normal engagement with art works, whether as products or as processes? Does not engagement with products and processes always involve, on some level - however unthematized - in invocation, or consciousness, of an underlying project? Perhaps the answer is: Yes, but this invocation usually belongs to the problematic of "artist's intent," and comes always already infused with contestation, ambiguity and questioning. A distinguishing feature of a "project," on the other hand, is that it includes a specific declaration of intent on the part of the artist, a defining proposal or pledge. "I will spend one year living outdoors, without entering a building, subway, car, train, airplane, cave or ship." "I will wrap the exterior of this building in such-and-such a fabric for a period of two weeks." "I will dress in pink, sit on this park bench for two hours, and then leave."

In all these examples, a certain space gets explicitly staked out - the space between intention and realization; the viewer is appointed surveyor of this space. The declaration tells the viewer that through the project's duration, will separate the intentional from the contingent, success from failure.

These declarations seem to be classifiable into two main forms, which one might call, respectively, boasts and blueprints. A boast announces to the viewer that a heroic feat is about to be performed. It whets the viewer's appetite and creates around the event for the viewer as unique, extraordinary, daring, admirable. It creates, in advance, the event's own epic description, its own panegyric.

About blueprints, I would say the opposite. They aim to eliminate distance between event and viewer, to negate the aural potential of the event, to render it transparent, un-mystified, familiar. They equip the viewer with a map of the territory and of the roads into it. They say: this territory is your territory; look: you already know all about it. You can engage with it safely.

The LA2 documentation was unmistakably in the blueprint category. So what are the reasons for rendering an event "safe," and what are the aesthetic implications? How does one relate to a "safe" event? Of course, the purpose of a blueprint might be to deceive the viewer, to give her a false sense of security. This is always partly the case: it is always false to pretend that an event can be reduced to a description. The description merely depreciates those aspects which it covers, only to leave itself open to an excess - that which has not been described and which becomes the piece's new mystery. And in fact something like this did happen in the case of LA2, where what was left out of the description was the surrounding world into which the event inserted itself and which in turn inserted itself into the event: the river, the walk, the grass, the streets, buildings, bridges, highways, plazas; the air, sun, weather; the light, the sound; cars, people, traffic. And, one must also add, the relationships, between the pieces; what it meant to put them all together; what it meant for them to form an event. It was as if, once the individual art objects had been rendered "known" in advance, the piece could no longer be about them, and had to be about something else.

On the other hand, the disclosure effected by the LA2 description could be thought of as being part of the civic-art nature of the project. Here, "civic" entails belonging equally to a whole community; being, in all aspects, continuous with other realms of civic life. The blueprint, by making the intentions and design of the artwork a matter of public knowledge and scrutiny, pitches itself against notions of art

production as a privileged, private, hermetic activity in which the work is secreted out of some generally inaccessible creative sanctum.

In this connection, let me end with a quote from Meyer Schapiro's 1936 address, "The Social Bases of Art" made to the 1st American Artists' Congress:

There are artists and writers for whom the apparent anarchy of modern culture - as an individual affair in which each person seeks his own pleasure - is historically progressive, since it makes possible for the first time the conception of the human individual with its own needs and goals. But it is a conception restricted to small groups who are able to achieve such freedom only because of the oppression and misery of the masses. The artists who create under these conditions are insecure and often wretched. Further, this freedom of a few individuals is identified largely with consumption and enjoyment; it detaches man from nature, history and society, and although, in doing so, it discovers new qualities and possibilities of feeling and imagination, unknown to older culture, it cannot realize those possibilities of individual development which depend on common productive tasks, on responsibilities, on intelligence and cooperation in dealing with the urgent social issues of the moment. The individual is identified with the private (that is, the privation of other beings and the world), with the passive rather than active, the fantastic rather than intelligent. Such an art cannot really be called free, because it is so exclusive and private; there are too many things we value that it cannot embrace or even confront. An individual art in a society where human beings do not feel themselves to be most individual when they are inert, dreaming, passive, tormented or uncontrolled, would be very different from modern art. And in a society where all men can be free individuals, individuality must lose its exclusiveness and its ruthless and perverse character.

* quoted from *Art in Theory 1900-1990*, Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, ed. Blackwell Press, 1992.