

DAMIR OČKO

*Repeat after me, side effects*

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Poetry and film, words, sounds and images shaping Damir Očko's artistic practice speak of the subjectivity in a fragmented world, a constellation of political crises and global insecurities, injustice, anxieties and fears. Past couple of years Damir Očko has produced a vast body of work consisting of artists films, objects, installations, poetry and works on paper such as photo-collages or graphic musical scores shaping artistic interest based in exploring poetic and political potential, by placing the human body in the center of a kaleidoscopic image that reflects positions of power, fragility or violence and their relations to modes of representation. Framing the visible and invisible, the opacity of language, exploring what is unintelligible, marginalized or shut out, as a way to understand how art is mirroring social structures.

On the occasion of the artists first solo exhibition in Romania, the exhibition project by Damir Očko *Repeat After me* at Eastward Prospectus, occupying gallery's two floors is conceived as a vast immersive panorama and is one of the most comprehensive exhibitions of his works to date giving an in depth insight into Damir Očko's artistic practice.

The exhibition builds up around the ideas and artworks behind several concepts explored in previous exhibitions such as *The kingdom of Glottis* (Palais de Tokyo, 2012-2013), *Studies on Shivering* (KM - Kunstlerhaus, Halle fur Kunst und Medien, Graz, 2014) and *Studies on Shivering: The Third Degree*, which saw Damir Očko representing Croatia at the 2015 Biennale di Venezia. It brings together artists' recent film production - four major film works since 2012: *We saw nothing but the uniform blue of the sky* (2012), followed by *Spring* (2012), *TK* (2014) and *The Third Degree* (2015) presented as film installations in the deambulatory subjective darkness of the basement exhibition spaces.

Films are set in dialogue with a series of newly produced and older interrelated works such as works on paper, photo-collages, experimental musical scores as well as sound installations, presented in exhibition rooms at the first floor. In this way aesthetic, conceptual and formal frameworks behind Damir Očko's artistic practice revolve around a central position of a moving image based work, exploring complex cinematic relations to create visually and intellectually immersive works become fully discoverable in the gallery space, inviting the audience to explore them and establish new connections.

As a long-term preoccupation manifesting in exhibitions and series of artworks conceived as "studies", artist has explored different social constraints and forms of repression imposed over the body as social and physical entity, unfolding such ideas on a formal and conceptual level. In the context of artistic self reflection, aiming to dissect and open up the ways works are made, the artist is exploring a thread of two main preoccupations - on the one hand employing the figure of the body at the crossroads of different imperatives, as a mechanism of resistance reproducing social relations and a metaphor of interaction between the society of control and the violence it produces, and on the other

how forms of language and technology of speech function as devices of communication and mechanism of the (speaking) body. These ideas are most intensively explored and articulated through the medium of film. Each film follows a fragmentary narrative, a dialogue between the languages of film and poetry, as an architecture of partially connected images, texts and contexts, fluidity of language, camera moves and cinematic procedures, shaping an *optical unconscious*.

Damir Očko's film practice is absorbing different genres and procedures to shape a specific form of narrative artist film, establishing his own cinematic language. The artist is using narratives that involve a reflection of the social or cultural context to create visually impressive works featuring specific cinesthetic qualities and an atmosphere of tension and melancholy. These works often represent a conceptualisation of images and stories while the artist uses devised visual codes to explore meanings, associations and emotions. In *We saw nothing but the uniform blue of the Sky* (2012) and *SPRING* Očko directs his artistic exploration towards the aesthetic, performative, and political potential of human voice focusing on one's (in)abilities to speak, flaws or speech impediments, as symbolic and physiological/physical predispositions of the "apparatus" of speech and its poetic and political potential, as seen in *SPRING*, which does not refer only to a season but to elements of potentiality and tension inscribed in the natural environment (an erupting volcano), a performance of contortionist's *springing* body, and a narrated text. The spoken word and poetry play an important role in Očko's films, and are present in all but the last film. What is often concealed in a visual narrative, it is made visible and spoken out in the narrated txt.

On the other hand theatricality, performance, body figures and physical presence of the body are present in order to become an image bearing a political, ethical or poetic meaning. Such as the issue of moral dilemmas and collective responsibility of the film crew and the artist/director in situations questioning the labor of the cast exposed in harsh weather conditions in *TK* or sensitive subjects while filming *The Third Degree*. Investigating the issue of exploitation behind film industry and art system, under the process of self-questioning, Damir Očko answers with both, an introspective take on the production process, and a sense of community of all participants taking part in it on an equal level.

In the film *The Third Degree* the artist is focused on the intensity brought by a visual narrative and theatre of cruelty, juxtaposing scenes of the exposed body framed in close-ups of scars left on the skin by third degree burns and the film crew reflected in broken fragmented mirrors, exposing the production site. Framed in an illusion of a continuous take slowly choreographed the camera, the situation addresses influence of a Brechtian theatre and a cinematic metanarrative structure. By blurring the fixed positions of subjects and objects, that of the filmed by the camera and the process of filming itself, Damir Očko unfolds the issue of collective responsibility and our position as witnesses and actors, as viewers and the audience. Placing the viewer in the middle of the discussion between art and politics, Rancière claims the audience needs to be deprived of a safe position in order to view a spectacle and to face itself as a collective.

In his films Damir Očko is engaging with different scenes and scenarios - from images from an ocean coast, a winter landscape, a volcano, to a theatre stage and an abstract darkness. We see them as spaces shaping different relations - contributing to the intensity of the scenes that create an atmosphere of uncertainty and feelings of detachment.

Scenes and mise-en-scene are achieved by interaction of different elements - protagonists, the spaces that frame them, specific context and the encounter with the audience. The relation between the environment (whether a landscape or a black box) and the body is unfolding in confronting scenes to provide a backdrop to highlight efforts of an individual, emphasized by nudity of the characters and their bodily exposure. Initiated in the film *SPRING* exploring of extreme figures of the body is present in recent films *TK* and *The Third Degree*. Here the image of an exposed body is an image of poetic violence and discourses of it's social representation shaping oppositions and extremes, such as old and young and circumstances like illness, health, winter or fire.

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At the first floor the gallery display is structured as a discursive space established by series of different studies, situations, and elements, like a series of "structures" - visual, textual, aural works generated from concepts found in artists' films or preceding the film as a research process, as *taking off the skin of the film itself*, claims the artist. Based on photographic background of images such as production photographs related to last two films, exhibited collages are intervened on by a layer of minimalistic abstract monochrome forms, geometric or crystal-like shapes, in black, copper or gold, or cut-outs and misshapes, organic forms and texts. Their structure, materiality and ungraspable indefinite forms are referring to the fragmentary character and the (im)possibility to inscribe the inconclusive narrative.

While musical scores exhibited in the one of the last rooms expose the intricate diagrams of concepts between sounds and poetry functioning like instructions or "narrator scores", sound installations are establishing an overall soundscape of the exhibition, echoing from the first and the last exhibition rooms. Featured as fragments of repetitive sounds of tongue clicking and teeth chattering, caught in a haunting inconclusive loop, the installation is directing audience's attention to the subjects in question - the physicality of language and speech apparatus, they are at the same time orienting it's movements through the gallery space as the beginning and the end of the transitory character of the first floor exhibition display.

The artist investigates specific situations, sites and ideas by connecting them to broader, related subject matter. He administers references of different origins without explicitly revealing them and processes ideas both intuitively and rationally. What is at stake is an aggravation of usual perception, challenging the certainty and the discomfort of expectation.

The artist often gives the observers and visitors the role of explorers ready to grasp the many layers of works either intuitively or rationally, exploring possibilities of articulating knowledge. In words by Jacques Ranciere - *to force the passive observer to occupy the position of experimenter who observes phenomena and seeks for their causes*. By saying *Repeat after me*, the artist is performing a speech act, inviting us to follow him embarking on the exhibition as a journey. Almost any speech act is really the performance of several acts at once, distinguished by different aspects of the speaker's intention -

there is the act of saying something, what one does in saying it, such as requesting or promising, and how one is trying to affect one's audience.

But our travel through the exhibition narrative begins almost as an impossibility to proceed. It starts with a massive pyramid shaped wall, it's full sharp triangular shape occupying door's opening constraining, at the very beginning, our way to enter the gallery space.

Choreographing our way through the exhibition what we are doing as an audience is we are actually following the artists' request from the title. By saying *Repeat after me*, shaped as a speech act, it implies a performativity inscribed in the subtle theatricality of the exhibition display. Očko's meticulous presentation at the gallery turns the gallery space into a device, an apparatus dis/orienting and shaping a dramaturgy of the exhibition, both physical and discursive spaces it occupies. As Giorgio Agamben claims *I will call an apparatus literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings.*

The tensions between an individual and the oppressive systems of power and control trigger a subjective imagination inscribed between visible and invisible narratives. In his works Očko suggests political implications and codes of social control, re-articulating forms of violence, fragility and resistance. Representing marginal and extreme conditions of the body, such as shivering or severe burns, he represents the unspeakable. His exhibitions usually unfold as devices by which the artist questions his approach to the process of filmmaking and artistic production itself, establishing a subjective space of tensions and ruptures. Such procedures work as a formal and critical tools to deconstruct or expose reality and fiction. In this way, *the observing subject*, in the words by Walter Benjamin, *is not simply confronted by unconnected debris of a whole, but with the fact that he has to build up, and break down this ruin from the parts of the whole.*