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## **From *The Abandoned to The Bird* – Sanja Latinović's Microworlds as Mirrors of the World's Condition**

Sanja Latinović, the artist who has been present at the art scene since the beginning of 2000s is almost always engaged in performance art; however, the said medium is free-flowing, and it frequently grows into sculpture, video work, or photography. In her works – which we can also attribute to her sculptural vocation – the artist creates new (non)spaces, with the emphasis on the relationship between fullness and emptiness and the individual themselves, i.e., herself at the centre. Her work could indeed be described with several key words – *fullness*, *matter*, *decomposition*, *void*. These four elements are being realized in different combinations: *fullness* sometimes contains another fullness – object, installation or liquid contain a body (for example *Aquarium*, 2008) or a body contains organic substance like food (*The Abandoned*, 2019) and sometimes it stands on its own – as a body, or as a post-performance object/installation (*Do Not Cross*, 2016); *matter* balances between the object and the body, sometimes standing independently as a body, and as an object it is being realized only as a post-performance object/installation, never as a self-standing object within the exhibition space; *decomposition* is being manifested through matter such as food, sand or glass (*Movements: White*, 2012); and finally *void* which with its emptiness embodies all three material elements listed above, because the performances of Latinović problematize the emptiness from different perspectives – be it a shaped void engraved into different kinds of materials (*Do Not Cross, Obstacle or Threshold*, 2022); be it formless void, just a movement enacted by a body which gets a momentary shape by usage of different tools, such as pencils or belts (*Deflection*, 2009, *Until Death Do Us Apart*, 2021); or be it void which was once a visible matter but then by decomposition or digesting, it magically disappeared from the physical world, extending its missing half further into boundless space, merging with it without any boundaries (*Half of My Meal is an Artwork*, 2023).

By using different combinations of four key words, incorporating the performative body, objects/installations/props and various matter, Latinović entangles the questions of human isolation, incommunicability and that of the position of the artist in the (art)world. Even if in various performances the artist positions her (nude) body into danger and emotional or physical pain, as her fellow pioneer performance artists Marina Abramović or Valie Export do, she mostly relies on what she has – her own

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body, usually not tending to include the audience into her performance pieces. Her body is mostly the centre of the piece, and she approaches it in a universal way, so not as her own body, but as a representation of all our bodies through which she questions our physical and emotional possibilities and limits. Latinović is never explicit in her feminist or political views, by applying physical and psychological focus she delves into deep abysses of the human psyche which is actually more radical than political performances of various contemporary artists whose objectivity and dealing with specific, current political topics make such works superficial. Latinović's works can be approached by the audience for projections of their own emotional states, therefore it is natural and logical that they are minimalistic and achromatic in their execution. We could say that they are subjective in their objectivity, and vice versa – objective within their subjectivity.

The scene, which is of crucial importance for the artist, is usually distanced from the audience so the spectator observes the performance from an external position. Such is the case with the works containing the performing body/bodies, the space itself and/or installation. Here we can mention works such as *Aquarium* (2008), *Deflection* (2009), *Movements: White* (2012), *Do Not Cross* (2016), etc. On the other hand, what happens when the very face of the artist becomes the scene itself (?), as is the case with the video performance *The Abandoned* (2019), perhaps her most direct and one of the most intimidating performances. It is one of the two performances made specifically for the camera; all others were transformed into video works after they have been performed live. In this short video performance, only during the first thirty seconds, we can see parts of the artist's body, her hands pushing sugar cubes into her mouth. After the cubes have been jammed into the oral cavity, the camera shows intense close-up of the artist's face as she tries to shout the sentence "I am abandoned" ["Napuštena sam" in Serbian] through her mouth full of sugar. Sugar has the role of a Madeleine cookie bringing the artist back to the time of a traumatic event when as a girl she felt abandoned. The viewer is confronted with her face going through this agony, screaming or producing inarticulate noise when trying to utter "napuštena sam". The viewer has no place to escape, the only thing which one can do is to face the artist. The role of the viewer is twofold, he or she can identify with the artist, and he or she can also become the person whom the artist addresses, therefore the one who abandoned her that day. Even if during the video we only see the artist's face, so there are no other protagonists, the sentence "napuštena sam" still implicates that someone is present in the subtext, the one who abandoned Latinović. This can refer to the artist's parents, friends, brothers or sisters, or even more, to humanity as such.

*The close-up, the correctly illuminated, directed and acted close-up of an actor is and remains the height of cinematography. There is nothing better. That incredibly strange and mysterious contact you can suddenly experience with another soul through an actor's gaze. A sudden thought, blood that drains away or blood that pumps into the face, the trembling nostrils, the suddenly shiny complexion or mute silence, that is to*

me some of the most incredible and fascinating moments you will ever experience.<sup>1</sup> So Ingmar Bergman remarked and it is known that during actors' delivery the director fostered a tone of intimacy and vulnerability, which, one could say, made their performance close to performance art. Although in terms of the narrative and the medium itself they don't have much in common, *The Abandoned* is still disturbing in a similar way as, for example, Bergman's movie *Cries and Whispers* (1972). While watching Latinović, we don't want to face the cries that whisper trapped in our souls, the language which seems to deteriorate into an inarticulate scream, or with our weaknesses and fears which we daily avoid facing. Hence Bergman used the face close up because it is the best way to show the fragility of a human being. As Deleuze noted – *the expression of a face and the signification of this expression have no relation or connection with the space.*<sup>2</sup> When we watch the face of Latinović, unlike in her other performances, we do not perceive the space, so we enter into some kind of claustrophobia even feeling ashamed because the artist confronts us with her vulnerability, which can be ours as well, it is just that we are afraid that we may burst into tears or screams. If *The Abandoned* represents the *cries* then performance *The Bird* (2014) could recall *whispers* in Latinović's work, and that is the second performance created specifically for the camera. There is no scenery, the indoor space is completely empty and the only thing that disturbs the silence is a bird tied to the skin of the artist's arm by a thin chain. The only sound that the viewer can hear is the flapping of the bird's wings. Unlike in *The Abandoned*, here there is no voice or language, everything occurs within the silent dialogue between two performers – actually, when Latinović whispers something in another artist's ear. Discomfort again takes over the viewer, but this time discomfort is caused by the sound of flapping wings of a bird that cannot fly and impossibility to understand the ongoing communication process. Both in *The Abandoned* and *The Bird* a feeling of intimidation is triggered by using different variations of sound (flapping of wings, screams or cries), the silence (intervals of silence between flapping of wings) or by using the lack of sound (a whisper that the viewer cannot hear). Perhaps this is also the reason why they were filmed in an intimate atmosphere with no audience – a high level of emotional intensity could not have been achieved within a public setting.

The suspense caused by the feeling of abandonment (of the artist) or the imprisonment (of the bird) evokes vagueness and emptiness – that part of the whole which will inevitably be lost, be it part of the meal in *Half of My Meal Is an Artwork* or almost all of the sand in *Movements: White*.

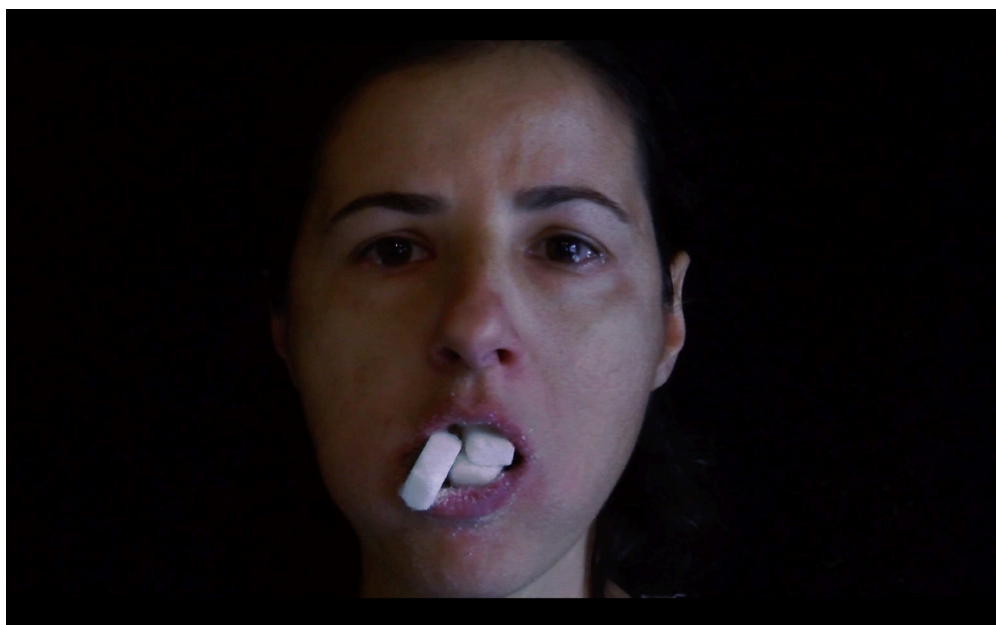
The works of Sanja Latinović talk about that unattainability, the impossibility of achieving completeness. Just as matter slips, so do style and medium. Minimalism turns into surrealism, realism into symbolism, performance into sculpture, and sculpture into drawing on the white canvas.

<sup>1</sup> [www.bfi.org.uk/features/ingmar-bergman-faces-close-ups](http://www.bfi.org.uk/features/ingmar-bergman-faces-close-ups), acc. on September 1, 2024.

<sup>2</sup> Quote from: Henrique Cotado, and Fernandes Isabel Paz Sales Ximenes Carmo, "Face and death in *Cries and Whispers*, by Ingmar Bergman," *Contracampo* 36, 2 (2017): 9, <http://dx.doi.org/10.22409/contracampo.v36i2.1026>



*Aquarium*, 2008. Photo Credit: Ana Lucia



*The Abandoned* (2019). Video made during Master Class of Marina Abramović



*Do Not Cross* (2022). Photo Credit: Bojana Janjić



*Movements: White* (2022). Photo Credit: Bojana Janjić



*Obstacle or Threshold* (2022). Photo Credit: Bojana Janjić



*Deflection* (2009). Photo Credit: Marko Milić



*Half of My Meal is an Artwork* (2023). Photo Credit: Marija Čalić



*The Bird* (2014). Photo Credit: Marina Lukić