

# Vlatka Horvat

Graham Parker

PROFILE >

VLATKA HORVAT'S WORK HAS HISTORICALLY BEEN MARKED BY REPETITION, simple puns (linguistic and visual) and rules-based durational projects: a performance of laying out and rearranging chairs in a pond in *This Here and That There*, 2007;

a video of the artist constantly changing seats in an empty theatre in *Restless*, 2003; sitting next to a partner and exchanging intimate insults and compliments through a camera in front of them in *Insults and Praises*, 2003 (in collaboration with Tim Etchells). If there has been a common thread it has been a tendency towards deadpan absurdity that reads as art practice as an endless 'knock knock' joke – amusing, then irritating, then mesmerising, as the artist insists on a repetitive set of call-and-response loops from the viewer or herself. It is the type of discipline that can only reveal itself as such over time and, for those paying attention, there has been a moment in Horvat's work over the last couple of years where the cumulative result of these deliberately slight gestures and actions has reached a kind of critical mass: a point reached (if not always successfully negotiated) by many artists, where their own historical practice now contains

both all the potential of a legitimate material in its own right and all the attendant danger of generating its own loops of self-parody.

For Horvat, perhaps the first signs of her own successful negotiation of this stage came with her recent solo show and performance at The Kitchen in New York. Having been 'knocking' at the door for some time now, Horvat has seen the recent intensification within her practice marked by an equivalent intensifying of attention in the city, which has seen her appearing at most of the stations of the cross of New York's influential not-for-profit scene (alongside The Kitchen there have been mini solo shows at Exit Arts and the resurgent White Columns, and a key group show at Artists Space), as well as several two-person and group shows in private galleries and now ongoing museum shows and residencies across the country. However the show at The Kitchen was perhaps Horvat's first chance to show a fully realised solo project and, perhaps, to give some clues to the future direction of her work.

The Exit Art and White Columns mini-surveys had been more typical of Horvat's earlier work, with one-liners mingling with the artist's then stock-in-trade of insistent revisiting of predetermined actions. The artist's body featured heavily, though more as found material than as subject, in keeping with an unsentimental economy of means that spoke as much to the pragmatism of Arte Povera or early performance art (Horvat's own roots are in performance) as it did to certain feminist readings of the body. A series of simple collages in which the artist appeared to be disassembled, limb from limb, only to be reassembled as a chair in *Body Chair (Charts)*, 2009, may have been superficially

Vlatka Horvat  
*This Here and That There*  
2007 performance





reminiscent of Linder Sterling’s woman-as-domestic-appliance sleeves for Buzzcocks, or even Martha Rosler’s domestic pop collages haunted by Vietnam and Iraq. However, rather than using radical juxtaposition to make a polemic point, Horvat opted to strip all further context from the final image. What remained were spare arrays that read as musical notations or perhaps Ikea instructions (albeit for self-cannibalisation) that were as rich in potential critical meaning as those other examples, but more ambivalent in the positioning of the body. And in other sequences the body was repeatedly hidden: wrapped in oversize packages in one photographic series (‘Packages’, 2005) and in other series hidden only in the sense that children are ‘hidden’ when they close their eyes in plain sight of you (‘Hiding’, 2003; ‘Searching’, 2004). The artist’s head might be buried in a hedge, or her feet would appear from behind a slender pillar – a recurrent visual riff within Horvat’s work is the artist’s attempt to appear ‘offstage’ while still in the centre of the frame.

Such theatrical concerns, as well as that previously mentioned meta-idea of critical mass, run through The Kitchen show – with the artist setting up a series of expectations and conventions for the viewer that she then both plunders and confounds to keep the viewer off balance – neither wholly immersed in a theatrical installation nor comfortably viewing discreet sequential objects. Entering the gallery, the viewer appears to be in a slickly executed show of post-studio sculpture: an escape ladder is mounted uselessly high up one wall and bisected by another, itself immaculately disrupted by a ceiling fan suspended at waist height swinging wildly through a slot in the wall just wide enough to accommodate it. The final element in this opening to the show is half a chair lying on the ground as if emerging or disappearing into the floor. As the viewer moves deeper into the show they find themselves negotiating a thicket of work that refuses to be neatly resolved. Elegant works on walls collapse to the floor, stacks of cardboard and mirrors lean casually in corners, while simple animations are projected through prisms that disperse fragments of them across multiple other works and even the body of the viewer. If that viewer backs away, a motion-detecting chorus of mechanical birds rattle into life to heckle them. If they move forward to embrace the environment as a cohesive, if chaotic, whole, the elements seem to become stubbornly isolated again. And finally, as if to mock their predicament, a Pythonesque animation of a pair of legs is projected wandering agitatedly from one extreme of the frame to the other.

Two works stand out. In *Horizon*, 2009, a long scroll showing an image of an endlessly repeating forest skyline crosses the wall like a cardiac readout, before peeling away and curling to the floor – the two dimensional image of the sublime defeated by gravity. In *Table Forest*, 2009, the centre of the gallery is occupied by a large wooden theatrical panel intersecting, and thus supported by, a cheap table with a formica ‘wooden’ surface. The panel is covered on one side by what appears to be photographic com-

mercial wallpaper depicting a forest, but which on closer inspection reveals itself to be a digital collage that might best be described as elegantly crude. The flaws are imperceptible at first glance but unmissable as soon as they become apparent: trees partially duplicate, branches become trunks which become branches which become blurred edges. The absurd propping of the table and the equally inadequate printed wood grain on its surface conspire against each other in a bathetic representational stand-off. It suggests a new, looser, confidence in the way Horvat is playing with her material – that she has found her voice, and is delighting in throwing it. ■

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Vlatka Horvat  
‘Hiding’ 2003

Vlatka Horvat  
installation view  
The Kitchen New York  
2009



## ■ Voids: A Retrospective

Centre Pompidou Paris

25 February to 23 March

## ■ Gakona

Palais de Tokyo Paris 12 February to 3 May

'There's nothing more to see', a woman informed her husband, before turning back and heading for the Level 4 exit at the Centre Georges Pompidou. 'This is borderline ridiculous', exclaimed another man, gesturing at the rooms around him. A third visitor, who had apparently brought her companion to see her favourite part of the Centre's collection, disappointedly concluded: 'Well, it was good before.' Faced with ten empty rooms at the heart of the Centre Pompidou's collection display, visitors to 'Voids: A Retrospective' were confronted with nothingness as a gesture – of trickery, provocation or erasure. Wandering through these empty spaces, I found myself at some point excitedly running towards pages strewn on the floor in one of the corridors, only to find that they were discarded tourist leaflets for the Sainte Chapelle. At that moment I finally resigned myself to the fact that the only things I was going to find in this exhibition were wall texts and labels, all carefully situated outside the rooms to preserve their emptiness. The texts each refer to past void exhibitions by nine artists, starting with Yves Klein's 1958 exhibition at the Galerie Iris Clert, and are complemented by a very thorough 500-page catalogue that includes an anthology of essays, as well as artists' statements and interviews, on various forms of void, nothingness and emptiness in art since the 1950s.

While 'Voids' is certainly the 'antiblockbuster' that its six curators intended, its ethical claims to a kind of 'honesty' – in its refusal to introduce any form of historical documentation or props related to the original exhibitions – are more difficult to sustain. Most exhibitions of the void challenge

our trust in the artist and the museum – Roman Ondák's *More Silent than Ever*, 2006, plays with this dynamic, as he informs his audience that the room is equipped with a hidden recording system. Just as Ondák's original viewers may have felt nervous as they started looking for cleverly camouflaged devices, I felt uncomfortably vulnerable to the curators' interpretative powers: could I rely on the only information that they had deemed suitable to impart? The first wall text about Klein's originary void did nothing to reassure me, as it failed to mention the artist's highly theatrical apparatus for the opening of *La Spécialisation de la sensibilité à l'état matière première en sensibilité picturale stabilisée* (*The Specialisation of Sensibility in the Raw Material State into Stabilized Pictorial Sensibility*), 1958, often referred to as *The Void*, which visitors entered through a blue curtain flanked by two Republican guards in full uniform, before being offered International Klein Blue cocktails.

Klein's unique brand of charlatanism-cum-mysticism is a far cry from Art & Language's verbosely analytical reflection on their *Air Conditioning Show*, 1966-67, where the use of air conditioning to regulate the temperature of an otherwise empty gallery aimed to highlight, they claimed, the 'mental or verbal' conditions of 'identifiability' of 'ordinary matter'. Where Robert Barry invites us to *Some places to which we can come, and for a while 'be free to think about what we are going to do'* (*Marcuse*), 1970, Robert Irwin's *Experimental Situation* of the same year focused attention on the figure of the artist, who regularly visited the empty gallery to think about what he was going to do. The three women artists in the exhibition, for their part, appear more interested in the gallery's architecture – encouraging visitors to consider the Lorence-Monk Gallery in New York 'in itself' rather than as a context for artworks (in Laurie Parsons' 1990 exhibition), revelling in the modernist beauty of Mies van der Rohe's Krefeld Museum Haus Esters (in Bethan Huws' *Haus Esters Piece*, 1993) or using the money for her exhibition at the Kunsthalle Bern to pay for necessary renovations of the historical building (Maria Eichhorn, *Money at the Kunsthalle Bern*, 2001).

Although some of this basic information is included in



Voids: A Retrospective  
installation view