

A fictitious Interview

Writing this essay, I tried to theorize the process of my art project at the same time to describe what happened in it. I felt I wasn't fluent enough to do it in the theoretical part. To succeed with that, I made up this interview, putting myself in the position of my imaginary other. This process became essential for revealing details about the project. I also use this form as another tactical gesture for presenting the work.

A. L-T.: Anna Lagiyou-Tsouloufi (the other).

I. S.: Imaginary self (the artist).

Anna Lagiyou-Tsouloufi: At first let me summarize your topic. You chose to realize this specific project "The outsider in and out of context" dealing with the status of employment, here in Weimar. Can you give me an outline to understand the idea behind the project?

Imaginary Self: At first, the issue to be pointed out within the context of my project is not only about the problem of employment, but a specific scheme of social, and cultural issues, and within it the development of new artistic strategies, as a means of expression and criticism. The points that bring together this scheme are: a) employment, in other words money to live and move around, b) education, in other words progress, c) travelling and tourism, meaning the experiential process of knowledge, d) technology, the means to progression, and e) globalization and the Global Market politics, the machine above, the governmental engine; and finally, the last but not least, the time of a human life, that runs through all those.

A. L-T.: Would you like to tell us, in which way you decided to work through all these issues?

*I. S.: Dealing with this scheme, it was difficult to focus on one theme. I got into the point where I had to focus on a specific topic that would help me to get into an action that would confront ideas in a practical manner. Another basic idea behind the project was to also reverse the idealized model of production of a spectacle into a real act. So I 'performed' employees, or workers, in various professions for two or three days. You know, I disguised as citizen, but at the same time I really worked. All the acts I performed were various aspects of an ordinary, everyday life, and there are as many as the members of a society put together in one mass. These activities, of a single person's routine, became for me an exceptional experience. The key word of this art process is *intellectual alertness*. Once a person is in such a mental state recognizes the world in a different way. Being in this position only*

for a short time, having in mind that I wouldn't have more than this one chance to enter this *experiential opportunity*, I tried to collect as many impressions I could. I faced other's people work as a space of observation for an art research.

A. L-T.: Why did you decide to use the idea of the Chameleon Citizen?

I. S.: I think it is a very good strategy to enter into a society, in a "gentle" manner; in this way I became indistinguishable for "attacks" (this means automatically, protection of any kind of assault by being in a new environment). I assimilated myself according to the preconditions of this place. On the other hand, I managed to insert myself into places that are "closed", or to express it better, "obviously hidden" to others, even native inhabitants of the city. Alternative tourism also comes to mind. What I want to say is that I use this form of disguise as a tactic to become part of the place's pattern. That doesn't mean I am fooling anyone, and I am completely aware of not fooling myself. The appearance is a very important issue for how people behave. For instance, while wearing a service uniform in a train station you have to be useful to people, otherwise they are going to get mad with you! It happened to me a couple of times.

A. L-T.: Who is the character you wanted to create?

I. S.: The character I wanted to create... I deal with the case of a person, who is actually living in a cultural and social environment, and at the same time has to theorize about the processes of his living within the identity of the artist. How this identity is shaped is the main question. After all, I end up with the conclusion that the artist's identity is the new global, international identity. Putting myself in this position, and playing with language, I made up the terms: *Tourist in education, a Tourist Trainee, or a tourist in parallel cultural realities... A transporter of artistic foible...* I experiment with ideas taken from the abstract, but practiced in actual reality. In the end I think I just wanted to create a character that would collect various experiences. You see there is a blending, a diffusion within the work's planning, between the identity of a tourist, of an artist-researcher, an employee, and a worker, a scheme I try to draw and point out here.

A. L-T.: How have you been treated by the other employees, your co-workers? How did they perceive your project? Were they friendly? Did they ask you why you were doing that? What were their reactions?

I. S.: I am not quite sure whether they all knew exactly what I was doing. You see, I could understand two thirds of what they would say and my German is not

so good. But for one thing, I learned German! As a "Praktikantin", that means a person in training, I was welcomed to take part in their activities, and assist them. In order to show me around, they had to perform their occupation for me in a way. In most of the cases, they treated me as a guest more than as a co-worker. In the train station for instance, I had one of the best experiences. I even helped the person in charge of the railway control do his work! I was happy to see they would also change their routine a bit because of my presence there; they were also very respectful, they took my identity into consideration, giving me credit for being incomprehensible, beyond their understanding in a way. It is a fact that from the minute I shared their working space and jumped into their costume, I became part of their species. I shared their labor and their anxieties while working. So in a way I shared their life. But I am sad that the thing I cannot share with them was a long term, common life.

A. L-T.: What did you really do, during work? What was actually your attitude there?

I. S.: In fact I used the space for working... I mean as an employee in training, but as an artist as well. I observed the movement and the people, what they said and what they did. I was making photos and I was also recording sounds. I have many hours of sound from my everyday in each place. I was trying to capture as much as I could... But I realized that the truth is that reality cannot be grasped. Even if someone records everything, he doesn't manage to grasp reality. It just happens... In the end you realize that the art object then becomes a shadow of what happened. It is already a memory. Hence, the presentation, together with the conceptual idea becomes the art-object.

A. L-T.: Tell me about professions you have chosen... Why did you choose these specific places?

I. S.: I must say I mostly chose places where native people work. I wanted to compete with this idea of being an active citizen in Germany, to emulate the workers of this society I live in. The people who work there must have an effective performance. I like the idea that they are, with their presence, the go-betweens in a system of authorities and citizens who constitute a society. I was welcomed to participate in their activities being in the privileged position of a legitimate European citizen, protected by an institution, the university. Everybody knows the Bauhaus here. And that was also very helpful in getting access some of the places, like the student restaurant for instance. I wonder how many people outside know exactly how life really is behind the stand, the bar, and in general the uniform of

the servers in our society? ... One of the reasons why I chose to collaborate with the specific places was also because of their title. These places are Ports of Entry, where mainly the exchange of the city with the foreign starts to take place (post office, train station, Asylum-seekers house, etc.). Actually, I made a combination of professions and places. In those places, I thought I could interact, be in contact with a specific public, through my actual, physical presence. In this case I would say that I did have an audience, or spectators. This is one of the main reasons why I chose these locations where I would work. The location of the happenings was an important issue for me. I chose these places mainly for the reason that a certain public had access to the place and I had access to the public's space. I chose places that were part of the public realm, or in other words, places where I could interact with a public. I would like to call it having an audience, or spectators, but on the other hand I hate this definition. I have a preoccupation of not willing to abuse the meaning of the words. And actually these spectators were by no means invited to any happening, or any action, in purpose.

A. L-T.: Which people did you meet in all of these places?

I. S.: Let me make a sum in my head... In the Asylum-seekers house the 'public' of course is Asylum-seekers from all over the world, and other immigrants, in the Studentenmensa students and the staff of the University... in the Tourist Information center I introduced tourists and foreigners to the local environment. Post office: except the post office employees, random people and citizens we would meet on the street, and people who would have to receive their post in hand. On the market: random people, market sellers, and people with a specific taste for Mediterranean specialties... and more.

A. L-T.: As you said, you didn't invite spectators to any happening, how do you explain, or, justify this intention and why do you call it an art project? Where is the art then?

I. S.: The machination, the plan...the strategy behind the project is the big art in the project! I reached the conclusion that in a way the whole project is a reversed performative action, a denial to the spectacular, its echo to be understood or felt from the audience, whatever this is and will be, every time the project is presented, even later in time. I perceive my project as a process in time and not as a finished act. On the other hand, it developed in such a way, that it became an act for a specific audience. Some people who know me, and who witnessed some of the actions, had a very puzzled and surprised reaction. And I really like it this way better, than to invite people for another spectacle. They could go to the cinema,

or to another organized performance. That doesn't mean mine wasn't organized, but it could not become part of any institutionalized spectacle because it was an everyday-living-in-action performance. Of course, then comes the Poster, which is up around in the city. That is of course spectacular, and it sabotages, intentionally, the project itself.

A. L-T.: It seems you follow a sequence of denials of your own acts.

I. S.: Yes but on the other hand, this has to do only with the things I say, because then you see I did all of these actions. While doing the practical part, I enjoyed and suffered from disbelief, at the same time, learning so many things from the people I worked with, things and information that I will probably never use in my future life. I felt like a tourist. And who said that it is a bad position, if it is possible for a tourist to really be somewhere... Only that from a certain point on I realized that my reality became an illustration, and this is what I am trying to criticize here among other things. I put myself in the position of the privileged traveler, but at the same time to the position of the guest worker in Germany of the '50s-'60s, trying to create a bridge between generations. In terms of my artistic language, I would say I am creating an ephemeral monument for my ancestors, repeating a ritual; like for instance the 1st of May, by making an abstract form, and taking their position, all at once. This is an exaggeration, but if I had more time I would try more professions.

A. L-T.: So, in the end you wanted to make a paradigm out of your self through this allegorical self, being a chameleon-citizen as you call it, pretending that you are employed, and at the same time exploring a place through working? What is your connection with social studies?

I. S.: ...I want to live like common people... (singing) You know these are lyrics from a song of a pop British band, The Pulp.³² The story of the song goes like this: She, a rich Greek student of arts in London meets this guy, and wants to experience the life of the common people, probably, to get inspiration for her art work. So the song goes on exposing this idea of a foreigner who wants to taste real life, and common routine, to see it from another point of view. The thing is that everyday anxiety can not become art... at least I am trying to find a way to transfer it into art. The songs talks about that... I can play it for you if you want it's great! Now getting very personal... I come from a working class family, and I have experienced this life during my past, before I entered the art world. I know many people with the same experience, and there is always a doubt in our heads about the value of art. Recently, after some struggle, I find myself in this privileged position of being sponsored to study my profession. I had to find a way to close this circle of the

³² "Common People" Single, "Daytime" CD single (CD1), Label: Island, released in 1995, from the British Pop Music Group: *The Pulp*, UK.

past and get to the point where I accept the value of the artist's job in society. It is a good lesson for me and for others to understand this position. In my other environment, the one of the working class, they still believe that the artist is an outsider, an idler, a loungeur, and not someone whose work is needed in society's development. Of course this has changed a lot in recent years, as more people got to study art, and became part of the production chain all over the western world. ...Back to your question... Since I am not a sociologist, not an art theoretician but an artist, I had to focus on aesthetics. I am not sure how many people have solved the mystery of what the content of the term aesthetics is. My targets in this project are multiple. I want to talk about the change of social systems; but still, to focus on the micro-level of this city I inhabit, Weimar. Within this life-level I can really touch and have immediate experience of the local intrigues. This is the main reason why I did these mini-practices. I didn't want to speculate and approach from a distance. When members of the communist party wanted to approach people and persuade them to join the party, they would do it via working in a factory. For example, since the 19th century, when sociologists and journalists wanted to make an inquiry to see the real state of the working class from close, they enforced it through actual research. For instance British journalist James Greenwood who published "A Night at the Workhouse", in 1866, the first recorded study of its kind.³³ ...And many more, Charles Booth in Britain, Minna Wettstein-Adelt and Paul Goehre in Germany... All of them tried to make their inquiry empirical. I was reading about that in *The Cabinet*, the art Magazine, and mainly the article was about a book. The article had the title 'Poor Like me'. It was about a social activist and a well-known author, Barbara Ehrenreich, coming from the US. One day she grabbed a bag with some clothes and started working in the service industry, living out of this income, as a waitress and so on, and during her free time she wrote about her experience. The book is called: *Nickel and Dimed: Or (not) getting by in America*. My way of approach is a bit similar to that but has a different interest. You see, I also did not want to approach people for some statistics, or for doing a survey. This is too scientific for me and it would create a distance. Then I could as well observe the world from my studio. But I also tried not to forget that this is an experimental project with many layers, as well. I indeed interviewed some of the people I worked with, during work. Although I had prepared a basic questionnaire, in the end, I realized that I would spontaneously question the people in a more personal way, like someone does ordinarily, when he meets someone new within his environment. Then I realized that ordinary questions would consist of, in fact, the questionnaire for the project. And again, I could not be out of the position of the observer. The time limitation of the project timetable would restrict my occupation in each place to two, or three days. Here comes my actual reality, that this is an art project, which is another strict framework.

³³ Source: *The Cabinet*, A Quarterly Magazine of Art & Culture, issued in the USA. From the article: *Poor Like Me, The persistence of class ventriloquism*, by Eric Schocket. Issue 11 Summer 2003

A. L-T.: Here we come back to talking about reality. Are you dealing with reflections?

I. S.: Yes, I always do, although, as I mentioned already probably, the real chameleon, the animal, does not reflect its environment, but instead it vanishes in it. It becomes a part of its phenomenological pattern. But here I would like to make a statement:

Trotsky said: Art is not a mirror to reflect reality, but a hammer with which to shape it. ...It seems that we the new messengers of contemporary art use this same hammer to smash the exact mirror that all the representations of the existing world have shaped. And you know in how many small pieces a mirror gets when broken... This act goes along with postmodernity and fragmentation. There exists a norm for how things should be shaped. I am trying to go against this norm. Metaphorically thinking, I believe that my system of functioning follows the sea-behavior system. I come from a country where the sea makes half of the land... The sea seems like a chaotic thing, and yet it has some rules of behavior.

A. L-T.: So, as far as I understand by now, one of your main issues is also the aesthetics of representation in the contemporary world-culture. What do you want to draw out of it with this criticism, in the end?

I. S.: I feel constantly like a moving actor. And the matter of *theatricality* is extensionally explored by many groups in the recent history of arts, like for instance by the *International Situationist*, and by artists, like *Cristian Philipp Müller*...at least of what I can think right now. I have to mention something from *Guy Debord's The Society of the spectacle*. He says that the spectacle is by definition immune from human activity, inaccessible to any projected review or correction. It is the opposite of dialogue. Whenever representation takes on an independent existence, the spectacle reestablishes its rules.³⁴

There is a certain kind of theatricality provided by the Mass Media, manipulating the distribution of information and knowledge...from ads to political debates. Again one of my points... I designed the posters as a gesture of subversion to this aspect... I know I can reach only few people with this gesture, but maybe it is enough.

A. L-T.: Talking of outsiders and their point of view. What about group working in the art field?

I. S.: There are two fields of action; the one has to do with logic and the other involves feelings. The one puts you at a distance, and the other in the world... It always has to do with collective consciousness. It is this in and out that combines an understanding of the world.

³⁴ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, caption from the chapter: *Ideology in Material Form* (1986, Athens, Free Press (Eleutheros Typos), for the Greek language)

I met some students when I was in Chicago for my studies. They were trying to create their own "scene", you know something like a small "theater", something that happens in small independent and daring groups wanting to make exceptional art, and become the Avant-Guard, which is not bad at all... But on the other hand I see traps: when some people create their own environment and have no idea what goes on beyond that, and maybe I am exaggerating now, but this is then a kind of paradise, something I experienced during my studies in Greece as well. This space is a shelter but also a trap at the same time... When you are inside it, you feel so comfortable in there, but out of it you feel like a monster. Think of all the Avant-Guard movements... It is something like a ghetto... but we probably all want to be in it, at least for some time...

A. L-T.: Do you suffer from disbelief of the power of a group creating something together, or rather, do you question your own ability to be part of it?

I. S.: ...Or, I am challenged by my disability to become a part of a group and adjust myself in a certain role... My fear derives from the idea of how to be an individual and create a personal original opinion and critique on society and political standards. Yet again, I want to become a member of a community, as well, as is obvious from the project.

A. L-T.: Standing at the artist point of view, since you have accomplished a task with the Chameleon Citizen project, what are your conclusions by now? Finally, how do you feel about it?

I. S.: Well, I think that one has to have more than 2 or 3 weeks to reflect on his experience. Maybe I will have better results in a year's time. Right now, I am talking about my impressions, instead. These impressions are pretty close to a fresh-made conclusion. It is like the reading of a text, or a book. With the first reading you have a general feeling about it, and then since you read again and again you are able to differentiate things, to evaluate circumstances, and results. And of course to get a feedback from the people who supported the project. Backed into the transcendental artistic point of view, and since you ask me to talk about how I felt working in those places... I constantly felt I was making an epitaph. Or better yet a monument to my past experience as an employee/worker, as I mentioned before. During the actual time of the practices, I was feeling liberated from the burden of formality. The places of action expanded into other parameters of perception. I could use my time to think about each place, the people, and the whole situation in different terms. I could color different tones of the environment. I tend to come to the conclusion that I was studying the space in terms of atmosphere, character, and motion. I was using the space to picture it, but from various perspectives. I was

in transition. Being in an environment where I could easily lose my sense of typical logic because of the false understanding of the foreign language, I perceive my experience as being the same as millions of people who have been in this situation and have the same transitional feeling.

A. L-T.: So, you perceived your environment in a completely different way than if you were doing the same project in your country.

I. S.: Talking about being in a new country, in a new city, or in a new place in general, of being a foreigner, the limits of the self are in the body. In those places, I had no knowledge where things were, the tools I had to work with, how the whole building looked like, and how it was to move in it. Someone in this state of mind does not know where the appropriate place to be is, on each given moment. It is always like that, when someone enters a new space. It is a weird kind of freedom. And this is also the secret of the good experience out of my plan for two-day practice. When the second day came, there was still some charm to the whole set up left for me to discover. From the 3rd day on in the same job it became a repetition of the same acts, a routine. Of course this is not absolutely true. I am talking in a general form.

A. L-T.: It seems in the end that the whole project was an adventure. What is the conclusion of the adventure, then?

I. S.: First, I want to say that this is a part of a bigger one in my life, if I can call it an adventure. The funny thing is, the more I think about it the more I understand it is common life for so many people on this planet. I mean, to live in transitional spaces, in foreign countries, to travel all the time for work, studies, etc. I imagine the lives of businessmen, and immigrants, people who are forced to stay in exile their whole life... My small adventure is not something exceptional. Again for what it used to be in my familiar society, meaning Greece, labor class, etc., it is an exceptional life, meaning the so-called *cosmopolitan life*. Probably, here in Germany, because of the educational system and the wealth of the society, things have been different in the recent past. On the other hand, being an addict of comic books, allegoric myths and fairytales, a basic reason for me to become an artist, I remind myself of Alice in Wonderland. I compare her different adventures with mine. Alice manages to overcome her uncertainty of her subjectivity, once she has already experienced the paradoxical underground life she was thrown into, an allegory for the adventure of the individual in life, in my opinion, having achieved the creation of her own personality. In the end, I think what I have kept the most is the feeling of the process.