

TITLE:

Object documentation as a contemporary art practice or what we can learn from artists.

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Short paper 10' plus question time [2000 words]

Abstract

By focusing on a specific artistic research carried out recently by Natasa Biza, an artist based between Paros and Athens, and the artwork that was produced as an outcome of this research, this short paper investigates object documentation as being practiced by contemporary visual artists. Natasa Biza's "For all party occasions: Object Lessons" deals with a large collection of undocumented -almost discarded- objects found in a storage of the Agricultural University of Athens. Biza's work is an interesting example of artistic research for it is related to the processes of archaeology and museology, raises issues concerning the aesthetics and the attraction of the object as well as the politics of display and knowledge production. Therefore, a reading of her work under the lens of our disciplinary fields aims to look into whether it is possible to learn from artists or whether artistic methods and practices add new knowledge on our fixed methodologies.

Introduction

"For all party occasions: Object Lessons" was presented in the contemporary art show "Geometries" curated by the curatorial collective "Locus Athens" in the Agricultural University of Athens in 2018. The exhibition intended to investigate the "anthropocentric promise of modernity, asking [...] whether we can step out of our knowledge systems and networks and re-imagine ourselves at one with our surroundings" (Locus Athens 2018). Within this context, Biza was asked to undertake a research relevant to the long history of the hosting educational institution that was established in the 1920's.

In a large hall of the campus that was temporarily used as the storage of the University Museum, Biza found a large amount of mass-produced kitchen utensils carelessly stored among old educational props, university's undistributed publications and various other undocumented objects. These objects attracted the attention of the artist primarily because of their vintage design but also because they were apparently purposed for domestic use and therefore found in the premises of a university made them seem inappropriate or even “a matter out of place”.

For all party occasions: Object Lessons

Of typical American design of the 1950s, cups, plates, spoons, cookie cutters, candy thermometers among many other things, form the collection that came into the possession of the University as part of the post-WWII American Aid program, known as the Marshall plan. Lacking significant information about the purpose of their shipping, the utensils held some mystery for the staff of the University and the artist herself. Her primary aim was to bring the collection to attention of the staff of the University, to save it from oblivion, to drastically alter their status from being a mass of things to a meaningful collection and to make it of interest to researchers. In this effort, Natasa Biza undertook an extensive research into magazine articles, archives and other related surviving collections. However the objects that have been the artist's main focus, remained of chief importance for the work and were to be placed into an artistic framework.

Therefore, in parallel with the overall research, the artist documented all objects in detail. Kitchen utensils were treated as archaeological finds and were documented in a way that emphasized their form. As both an artistic process and an archaeological, museological practice, the documentation adapted the style of an old-fashioned archaeological cataloging system and the minimum standards according to the code of ethics ICOM issued that reads “documentation should include a full identification and description of each object, its associations, provenance, condition, treatment and present location” (ICOM Code of Ethics, 2006, 2.20). Filing a sheet of information and a picture for each object and naming the archive “Marshall collection of the Agricultural University of Athens” defined this mass of things as a collection.

Documentation appeared as the first and most important requirement to give the objects a new life from being mere curiosities stored in the old depot of the university's museum to being actual museum objects. By isolating the objects in a single archive, Biza defined the collection, suggesting a resisting of their gradual disappearance. Some of the objects were spotted in use, scattered around the campus, most probably appreciated for their vintage design. The archive also suggested a postponing of the consequent erosion of memories related to the documented objects. As a museum intervention that took place in the premises of the Agricultural Museum of the University, the complete archive was delivered to the administration of the Agricultural University of Athens in order to change the agency of the objects and trigger any kind of response (Gell 1998). “In this way the institution is at least committed to maintain them” as the artist told me during the opening of the exhibition.

Towards this musealisation of the objects, Biza invited a round table discussion in order not only to raise awareness among the stakeholders of the collection but also to highlight that the same objects may exist in a variety of different contexts and narrate a number of different stories. I was invited to coordinate the discussion and thus I had the chance to talk in depth with the artist and the participants. The invited participants were from diverse academic backgrounds and they were asked to comment on the collection, its history, its archiving and documentation, its values and meanings and its future uses. The discussion that took an experiential approach was held around a table where coffee and cookies were served in the Marshall kitchenware. This performative action shifted the attention from the material aspects of the archival practice to the immaterial discourses produced over the diverse meanings of the objects and opened up the research procedure to the public. In this way, knowledge about the Marshall collection was not produced behind the closed doors of an institution but was made public, questioning the boundaries of traditional paradigms of museum collecting and archiving.

What was left from the round table discussion constituted the artwork that remained exhibited throughout the exhibition. A round table with some kitchenware on the top and two archival boxes specially created to protect the archival material which was considered of some

intrinsic value as it contained high quality photographic prints alongside six large prints of a selection of objects provided the setting for the audience to engage with the archive.

Documenting and archiving as a form of action

The archive of object records that included 3000 objects of 167 different kinds, stands both as a form and as an archival activity. As a form it provided the necessary materiality for the work to be presented in an art exhibition among other material artworks. This elaborate archival materiality of the work was expected to appeal to the local and international public of the exhibition in a way that would make the objects meaningful. Thus the archive created by the artist served both as a source of information and as an object that objectified the meaning and value of the Marshall collection, while constructed a visual material commentary on history writing. In this way, Biza attempted to determine the viewer's perception of these otherwise mere everyday household objects.

As an archival activity “For all party occasions: Object Lessons” with its slightly ironic title, was intended to expose a missing part of a larger story by employing a critical approach towards the ways in which a university museum handles its history. Documentation and the formation of an archive were seen by the artist as the key processes for an object to enter the classified world of a museum collection and consequently partake in knowledge production. Besides, archives have lately attracted a renewed attention across disciplines that might foster thinking and practice beyond just being sources for historical study. As rich subjects the archives have inspired many contemporary artists, such as Mark Dion (to give only one example), that have been integrating historicist concepts in their artistic practices (Adamopoulou & Solomon 2016). Natasa Biza too, often deals with museum and curatorial practices commenting on academic knowledge production processes and the conventional formats of knowledge representations.

Working within the archival turn, Biza “seek(s) to make historical information often lost or displaced, physically present” (Foster 2004: 4). The temporary art exhibition provided only an occasion that historical information revealed by the art-making processes was displayed. Yet, Biza went beyond the temporary display of her work by making her involvement within the institution

permanent. In one of her older works entitled “Plan for Planting” (Yalouri & Rikou 2017) the artist intervened in a site-specific way in the landscaping of the Athenian Agora whereby she created tags -almost identical to the tags used in the archaeological site- in order to name the plants that remained out of the official narrative produced by the planting plan that the American School of Classical Studies applied in the 1950s (Thompson and Griswold 1963). Following the same mode of artistic intervention, Biza provided the Agricultural School of Athens with a detailed documentation of the Marshall collection and by doing so, she immutably altered the symbolic and suggestive power that the objects hold for the institution.

Concluding remarks

In art-historical terms, “For all party occasions: Object Lessons” can be seen as part of the longer tradition of artistic institution criticism or can be understood within the context of the archaeological (Renfrew 2003, Roelstraete 2013) and the archival turn (Foster 2004) in contemporary arts. It is indeed valid to say that art practice is lately imbued with theoretical knowledge (Busch 2009) and recent developments in artistic research have significantly contributed towards this tendency. Artists have been practicing a variety of research methods that draw from other disciplinary fields, but are they developing an independent methodology or new modes of knowledge production?

In the last decade, artistic research has gained much scholarly interest and has arose as a significant tendency in contemporary art. An increasing bibliography on the subject attests to that (Sullivan 2010, Klein 2010, Elkins 2009 among others). The artists' contribution to knowledge production is in the core interest of a on-going debate between artists and theorists. Appropriating methods from various fields and combining them in interdisciplinary ways has been one of the characteristics of artistic research that is being appreciated, especially by anthropologists (Marcus 2010, Schneider 2008 to name just two). Yet, in terms of knowledge production, artists seem to introduce new objects of knowledge -often unexpected ones.

The case of Natasa Biza's “For all party occasions: Object Lessons” that concerns us here is

an eloquent example of such an introduction of new objects of knowledge, both literally and metaphorically. The artwork, which must be seen as inseparable from the performative round table discussion, assisted some new reconsiderations of the difficult or at least the uncomfortable past of the Cold War and its concurrent Greek civil war. This performative and participatory interpretation of the documentation archive revealed many interesting aspects of the stories of the Marshall kitchenware, which despite their colorful and playful design are associated with an obscure past.

Contemporary art and artistic research can surely facilitate new knowledge, yet it remains to be discussed and put under thorough consideration whether art is just another practice in the toolkit of other fixed methodologies or it is a genuinely interdisciplinary field sufficient for producing knowledge outside the disciplinary limits and boundaries.

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