The Fortress of Solitude from the holy wood of eternal noise

Chapter IV of “The White Dot and The Black Cube”, an exhibition project in six parts
*Artists*: Larisa Sitar (RO), Roman Štětina (CZ)
*Curators:* Diana Marincu, Anca Verona Mihuleţ
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Courtesy of the Polansky Gallery, Prague

The exhibition investigates the distances we choose to take in the outer world as well as the individual’s zones of intimacy within the inner world, setting its starting point from an undertaking that might amount to a fictional construction of a parallel reality in the form of a Fortress of Solitude. We conceived this Fortress as a personal and cultural construct, in which the heroes are transposed to the present and explained by means of artistic instruments that combine digital techniques with uncommon industrial materials and natural, artistically and curatorially unprocessed, natural settings.

The two invited artists respond to this challenge by outlining a borderless map of imagination, on which the backstage character is conferred the aura of a hero. In his monograph *A*ntikensehnsucht und Maschinenglaube. Die Geschichte der Kunstkammer und die Zukunft der Kunstgeschichte (*The Lure of Antiquity and the Cult of the Machine: The Curiosity Cabinet and the Evolution of Nature, Art and Technology*), Horst Bredekamp tells us of parallel spaces emerging from the association of diverse worlds and experiences, in which man deploys his divine creative power. Thereby, the baroque cabinets of curiosities are interpreted as precursors of cyberspace, as places in which it is possible to delineate our dreams.

In the comic books, the Fortress that Superman builds as a depository of his memories, of identical copies of his loved ones, of his experimental laboratory, of the most avant-garde technological inventions and of some personal objects, functions as a refuge of the super-hero and as a symbol of US-American pop-culture. Designed according to the principles of a cabinet of curiosities, but adapted to the imagistic conventions of its time, Superman’s residence is not entirely inaccessible, but the feat of reaching it is contingent upon running through certain well-defined stages. Friendship, familiarity with certain behavioural codes, physical and psychological trials, an understanding of advanced technology – all these are ways of selecting who is granted or refused access to this personal refuge. For this reason, authentic intimacy and the hero’s true personality cannot be fully grasped. When trying to translate it into “reality”, it all turns into myth, into the conventions of a narrative, into absolute ambiguity.

Our hero does not consider himself to be above life and death. He is not arrogant. Rather, we might perceive him as being moderate and empathetic in his camouflage, indecisive about choosing between the quiet life in a natural seclusion and its artificial copy.

The *Fortress of Solitude from the holy wood of eternal noise* showcases a cross-dialogue between works that Larisa Sitar and Roman Štětina created at various stages of their artistic careers. Brought together, these works are able to pierce the elastic membrane of traditional displays. The convergent forces, questions and contradictions do not allow for any historical contextualization or indirect approaches to the presented themes. Thus, the viewer’s experience is as direct as possible and is based on the principles of discovery and doubt. In their works, Larisa Sitar and Roman Štětina apply the principles of reproducibility and appropriation, which they combine with the theory of the folds, in order to demonstrate that time and space can be deconstructed by various means, culminating in the act of narration. Larisa Sitar’s digital collages are set in relation to Štětina’s geometrical objects from the *Drawing Lessons* series; this association determines the creation of an alternative mode of debating the chronological and spatial components, a model enhanced by the constant flow of silly putty running down each object.

Larisa Sitar often portrays discrete characters, faceless voices with an acute awareness of their end, permeated by the fairytale-like atmosphere. These beings are transposed from collective consciousness – hence their ability for storytelling and self-construction. The history Larisa Sitar usually refers to is neither stable nor closed, but rather a chance for the suspension of ideologies and an opening towards ancient mythology, as re-encountered, perhaps, in a village in Maramureş.

But no matter how well the boundaries of the fortress are secured, there is always the earthly, constant turmoil upon which the hero is called to intervene and a place where he meets with “reality”.

The heroes in Larisa Sitar’s works use sleep as a bridge towards a hypostasis of meditation, towards a time of suppression in which they regenerate and accept themselves. Roman Štětina’s heroes are generally characters from the 1960s and 1980s radio and television industry, some brought forward from the backstage, others extracted directly from the screen. They are visible and invisible at the same time. The works of the Czech artist start from setting out a few “pieces of evidence” for the discovery of the fallen hero – this time very human, flawed and anguished. The replica of the famous statue of Doryphoros, with a piece of silly putty running down from the top of his head, stands for the unveiling of a different type of hero – a latent hero, subject to several processes of de-composition and re-composition, partaking in changes, but remaining unchanged. This is the profile of an absent hero, depleted of his powers, fallen under the layers of history, like Larisa Sitar’s Superman falling forever into the abyss.

Her audio series *Don’t let me die, for I won’t let you live!* comprises recordings of people telling, at dusk, of their confrontations with the supernatural or with personifications of their greatest fears. The voices are strong, thus compensating for the lack of visual anchors. Each and every time, the test to which they were subjected through the encounter with the ghosts brought about a major psychological change for the storytellers. The “reality” contoured by Larisa Sitar becomes eminently subjective, as it does not exist outside the space of increased sensitivity to what nature is communicating to us.

The artist’s digital collages conjoin fragments of prints and drawings made available in the online space by the British Library, resulting in visual constructions that are nostalgically reminiscent of 15th and 16th century Dutch prints and paintings. The digitalization of images and their online availability, free of charge and free of royalties, result in the creation of an immaterial corpus of signs, illustrations and characters that transgress their initial boundaries and open up a new horizon in their reception – the unprejudiced visuality of the present. Larisa Sitar's endeavour continues the idea of the digital archive by creating new associations between all its disparate parts, with each image acting as part of an infinite puzzle. The collage, understood as a vital instrument in the construction of a visual discourse on the theme of the past, is charged in this case with the desire of closing in upon that which is inaccessible, of creating new projections of history – often veiled in mythology and mystery. The themes of ruin, of the animal guarding the man, of the guardian angel and of the lost paradise trigger the obsession and nostalgia for other spaces and times, the passage being facilitated by the green island in the centre of the exhibition – i. e. the garden.

The indoor plants borrowed by those who reacted to the *Call for Garden* contribute to the imaginative creation of a non-place, a point of relaxation from an institutional point of view, inserted between the museum’s walls as a space of refuge or reflection in which characters rest and crystallize their answers.

This insertion brings to the fore a period from the recent history of the museum, singled out through Liviana Dan’s curatorial gesture. In 2014, from the position of interim director, Liviana Dan tested a new working method within the institution by arranging a “summer office” populated by plants, lounge chairs and umbrellas. The museum thus experimented with the relaxation and horizontality of dialogue, by which fixed hierarchies become friendly and the role of the curator becomes reflexive.

The plants from Larisa Sitar's garden are neither arranged nor pretentious, nor really exotic. They represent the grey area in which natural environment and artificial constructs meet spontaneously. The circularity of the exhibition's construction claims a second participative moment from the audience: at the end of the show, the audience will be invited to choose a fossil from a pile containing both original fossils that the artist found throughout Romania, and perfect copies thereof.

In the world created by Larisa Sitar, coincidences and superstitions on the one hand and scientific proof on the other are equally credible in the construction of a clear and singular identity. Nature sometimes imposes itself as an uncontrollable and durable force, situated above humankind’s edifices, no matter how glorious they are, and forming its own temporary monuments and claiming its territory from its own interior.

In Roman Štětina's video *Tongue Twister,* we meet Jitka Borkovcová, a 90 year old sound engineer, who edits a sound tape by cutting out the areas with mispronunciations, subsequently taping the pieces with correct reading or speaking back together. The artist discovered the photograph of the sound engineer in a 1960’s electronics magazine, in which a conventional article presented Czechoslovakia's technological achievements and its know-how-transfers with African states. This hero of “noise”, incidentally discovered on a stamp-sized image, proves that sound also needs salvation, in order to be re-cast with a new aura.

Sound itself becomes a character in the clearly delineated spaces of the exhibition. Roman Štětina recorded a series of gestures lacking an immediate meaning; when enclosed in a TV screen with augmented sound, however, they define a new perceptual territory and could be interpreted as filming tests or fragments of a mysterious soundtrack. In the catalogue of his last personal project, presented at PLATO, a contemporary art platform in Ostrava, and titled *Instructions for use of* Jiří Kolář, the exhibition's curator, Marek Pokorný, comments on the one hand on Roman's fascination with recording equipment and the physical conditions of radiophonic broadcasting, even though on the other hand the focus rests on describing hidden events and actions aspiring for the creation, the capturing and the conservation of acoustic history.

The artist understands the specificity of the acoustic medium that he approaches from the outside, yet straightforwardly, without precautions; he is interested in the disorder of the process rather than in the final, cleansed and articulated result of any recording.

Roman Štětina's video work *Lost Case* consists of putting together emblematic scenes from the TV-series “Columbo”, tracing the main character, Peter Falk, from the beginning of the series, when he is still young, up until the last episode, which was shot in the early 2000s, when a grizzled Peter Falk is moving with some difficulty through the scenes. Almost 200 hours of film were edited in order to find the particular moments in which Columbo arrives at the crime scene alone and finds clues taking him closer to solving the mystery; the sound was completely removed and only a symphonic leitmotiv used to highlight certain scenes. For the current show, Roman revisited this work, focusing on the sound and replacing the images with a static colour. By means of absence, the image is posited as a continuation of the sound, actually becoming its tacit illustration. Thus, paradoxical relations betweens the elements of the same entity are generated, which, in turn, trigger another factor present in the Fortress of Solitude – the *mystery* factor.

The point of convergence of the various experiences engendered by exhibitions could be considered as the encounter of three spatial categories, envisaged by curator Paul O’Neill as follows: the background, i. e. the architecture of the exhibition space, as an essential aesthetic experience; the second level as an area where the visitors interact with each other according to the exhibition’s structure, its design and the itineraries for visiting the space; and the foreground, where the relation between subject and object is established. The three plans overlap and co-produce, alongside the artists, the structure of the exhibition’s means of expression. This is what O’Neill, in one of his experimental projects, terms “Coalesce” – an extended exhibition format based on the mutual collaboration and melting together of the auctorial instances into a new in-situ production.

The scrupulous divisions of the exhibition space transpose us into a labyrinth wrought with hidden corners, in which we are startled by the encounter with piercing cat’s eyes, by the absolute image of Doryphoros’ faded glory or by a swiveling divinity mastering dragons. The four dimensions of the hierarchy of human contact – intimate distance, personal distance, social distance and public distance – constitute a polarization of interaction based on two distinct areas, private and public space, as if the fluctuations of the two and the trespassing of those boundaries would prevent Superman from ever flying again, or Columbo from smoking his cigar while having the revelation of who the culprit is.

by Diana Marincu, Anca Verona Mihuleţ