

INTERVIEW WITH AMALIA PICA

Amalia Pica

I am Tower of Hamlets, as I am in Tower of Hamlets, just like a lot of other people are

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Jamie Stevens: The first work we encounter in the exhibition is Inside, outside and across, the festoon lights hung on the outside of the gallery. You have shown the piece previously and I wanted to ask you about the decision to include it?

Amalia Pica: It's a reconsideration of that first version of the piece which I made a few years ago. I always wanted to re-work the idea - this passage from outdoors to the inside of the gallery. This is also what happened in my relationship to Chisenhale, in that I first worked on an offsite project but then the conversation developed into an invitation to make a show in the gallery space.

The piece is also a note on artistic operation. I look at what is happening in the world and I wonder how a work of art can be as interesting as the stuff we experience or see when walking down the street. It's like a parable, we see something then try to make the best of it but there's this translation into language upon the piece entering the gallery space in which something is lost, in this case the colour of the bulbs.

JS: The festoon piece clearly indicates a difference between the gallery space, the foyer and the exterior of the building and there's a play on how our expectations alter or shift upon entering the gallery.

AP: I work with a lot of celebratory elements, like the festoon. They are evocative of things that belong to the art world as well, like how the foyer space is busiest at Chisenhale during openings - it's transformed into a pub. The whole festoon is a work, not just the part that sits in the gallery and I think the festoon still functions as it does at a pub or wherever in the foyer.

JS: A number of your works seem to operate as metaphors for art making as much as interrogating an idea of collectivity, which is driven by these beacons of celebration like the bunting, music and lights.

AP: Definitely, there is a self-reflective current through my practice as a whole. Inside, outside and across is specifically a reflection of how it feels to make art with that kind of material or reference to the 'outside' world. The issue of collectivity is there in the search for things that are shared or common. The ultimate question is for me whether art can be a form of communication. Obviously the issue of the viewer completing the meanings of an artwork complicates how art might communicate. The question I am interested in about art is how images can act as language. I do include myself in a tradition of artists that have thought about language but not necessarily through text. I think that issue is always present in my work and the self-reflective side of my work addresses that question of whether I am saying something particular or not. It's a failure from the very beginning because we know that interpretation is going to get in the way, it can't be a straight-forward message.

JS: Is failure an important concept to your work? There was such commitment to detail by you in preparing these works for fabrication and installation - even with the elements that look potentially readymade, like the festoon - that it would be wrong to totally privilege this idea of failure when actually everything is presented extremely deliberately and with fastidious attention on your part.

AP: There are a lot of things that are important to me in the process of making works which I would never expect anyone else to see or decipher but that genuine feeling of wanting to get an idea across is very important for me. I know that there's no guarantee of people reading certain ideas in the work that might be close to why I've made them so I know that failure will occur, it's part of the process of reaching out. There's a potentiality in failure. We might get carried away, for example, with what somebody is saying to the point where we forget they are actually spelling out words that have a certain grammar. If somebody has a speech impediment, it isn't a failure but there is a dysfunction that makes us notice they are making an effort to speak. We start to focus not on what they are saying but on how they are saying it, the brain activity that shapes the mouth and the huge effort that is. That's an idea I feel closer too, that rather than failing we can somehow introduce a dysfunction that brings us closer to the method and attempt of

communication.

JS: *This exhibition affords each work a lot of space and there is a kind of quiet aesthetic to the exhibition as though these works were delivered as singular gestures when actually there was an incredible amount of energy that went into their realisation. How do you arrive at that final look of your exhibitions?*

AP: There is something about that quietness that I haven't quite put my finger on but that is definitely crucial for how I need the show to come together. There is something of the casual appearance of the materials that has to do with an understanding not only of art but also of life, as well as moments in which things come together as though they make sense. The world is cruel, absurd and meaningless but there are these moments where things seem to fall into place and make sense, albeit very fleetingly. I look for that balance in the arrangement of the materials, although I also want the works to look as though they could change or evolve. I don't want to close down the meaning of what they do.

JS: *It's interesting to think about how that balance is achieved. One of the most important currents running through all of the works in this exhibition is how you use scale.*

AP: Scale is a way for me to grab ahold of the space. Whenever I am planning for a show I think about how people are going to move through the gallery and I tend to pull out a specific work that helps me imagine that. This is why I reconsider a lot of previous work because I usually start with a piece that will determine the rest of the exhibition and how people are going to navigate the final space. So here the wall piece, *Switchboard*, came first and the show grew from there. I then decided to include the photocopy piece with two figures, one of whom we can't see when we enter the gallery because the wall obscures half of the image. A conversation happens with the architecture initially and then consequently that triggers how the works relate and speak to each other.

JS: *This process of reconsideration of previous works is very much present here, a number of the elements in this exhibition have been presented in previous iterations.*

AP: I don't think my work progresses as a line, I see it more as a constellation. I'm constantly filling in gaps that might have occurred five years before. There will always be a certain amount of reconsideration. I've been making photocopy pieces for a long time, for example, and there are some consistencies in what the medium means for me – about a particular attitude towards an event and the individual production method in tension with the final scale – but this is the first time I have added colour to the collages. Introducing a painting process is specifically important to this exhibition and the image's relationship to the festoon work, in which the vitality of the lights is lost and becomes colourless in the gallery.

JS: *And the photocopy piece is actually linked to an older performance work of yours – Strangers (2008).*

AP: Yes, the photocopy and the bunting are separate syntactical devices from previous works. The bunting started as a wink or a note on cultural intimacy and this idea of coming together with strangers, the potential of these celebratory moments. *Strangers on Common Land* incorporates that performance in both title and meaning, shifting the framework but also extending the idea. The landscape, this common farmland, frames the performance in this bucolic setting but then the photocopy has a billboard-like quality, almost how an individual might generate an image on that scale.

JS: *The image in the photocopy piece is obviously interrupted by the dimensions of the A3 page and that tension between items sized for an individual and the impact of the work's final size is also used in Switchboard and with the festoon lighting.*

AP: It's funny because in my experience of making this exhibition, I imagined that the biggest piece in the gallery would be *Acoustic Radar in cardboard*, which was the only work I made in my studio. I could barely walk around it in that small space and the sculpture seemed huge. The scale of it was a lot bigger than me stacking up a pile of photocopies and arriving at the gallery. I very early on realised that I didn't have the technical or financial capability to erase my trace. The way my work grows bigger is step by step, not making something huge from scratch.

JS: *The I am Tower of Hamlets... project concludes a few weeks into this exhibition after a year of your sculpture being hosted by Tower Hamlets residents. How has that work unfolded over the duration of the past year?*

AP: The project definitely exceeded what I was expecting in terms of the feedback from the hosts, people were so kind and really embraced the idea. I never expected the feedback to be such an important factor in the project. The project really begin with my thinking about what makes an area, it's not the public parks or monuments, it's what happens behind closed doors.

JS: Which links to the sculpture being on display in the gallery office upon its return at the end of June.

AP: Exactly, it literally forces you to create these images of where the sculpture has been, to imagine beyond the permitted gallery space. The hosts were not required to take a picture of the sculpture because I don't necessarily care about the actual windowsill it might have sat upon, for example, but instead I'm interested in how other people might imagine the spaces that the sculpture has occupied.

JS: One of the things I really enjoy about I am Tower of Hamlets... is that the sculpture itself is the most gallery friendly element of all the works you have included in this exhibition but then has this awkward condition set upon it in how we can access the sculpture, whereby to see it you have to knock on the office door and engage with gallery staff. What is the story behind the object itself?

AP: The sculpture is a loose representation of the Echevaria plant; a succulent that is native to Mexico and is named after a Mexican botanical artist called Atanasio Echeverría but the plant's name is actually a misspelling of the artist's surname. So then the title of the project – *I am Tower of Hamlets, as I am in Tower of Hamlets, just like a lot of other people are* – also has that error in translation. The sculpture is actually a replica of a plant in Kew Gardens, despite being from Central America. The plant is resistant to a number of difficult conditions so I thought about the sculpture inhabiting a number of different environments without much trouble.

JS: The Mexican plant that you encountered at Kew seems to correlate with other pieces in the show – these markers, such as the festoon lights and the fiesta music – that seem to play into a certain exoticism of Latin America.

AP: The first time I showed the light piece someone told me that they were like South American party lights but I had never seen these lights in South America. I would have thought they were Eastern European or something. It's the same with the song, the singer is Italian and sings in Spanish to try and conquer the Latin American market. She's playing to the cliché, literally. I don't expect that irony to be translated and for you, perhaps, the song is South American but for me it's a representation of what someone in Italy thought would sell well in South America.

JS: Also we don't encounter the cliché of that music in an immediate way, it's muffled and distant sounding.

AP: Overhearing is the crucial thing in that work, it's not the cliché itself which is interesting, it's more how inbuilt our ability to produce images in our own minds of where that music might come from. If you think of a flamenco dancer or coconut or palm tree, it's not something you have come up with yourself and for me that's where it can become political. We are all conditioned to imagine.

JS: The presentation of your work plays directly into that discussion, questioning the gallery as being a space in which we are entitled to imagine. One key strand throughout the works is how listening might be understood as an imaginative activity.

AP: I'm interested in creating images that are produced through listening. We have somehow equated the unveiling of a narrative in the shape of an exhibition to storytelling. My interest in this figure of the listener is about who are these stories being told to. *Acoustic Radar in cardboard*, for instance, is a sculpture that is also capable of being activated by a performative action but that only results in another image, a tableau. The sculpture is not made from wood or metal but from cardboard, which renders it useless as a device for listening so it can only operate as an image. In the practical consideration of how to make the performers comfortable, I came to the decision to give them kneepads because it reinforces this idea of listening as an activity.

JS: How important is site specificity to your work? A number of the pieces in this exhibition have had to be fabricated from scratch in the installation period leading up to the opening of the exhibition, even though

they might seem very transferrable.

AP: Site specificity was the most important question to me as a young artist. I was making work in Argentina and it wasn't about being Argentinian but when I moved to Europe I somehow had to excuse myself in a way that wasn't demanded of European students. I was asked to account for the Argentinian-ness of my practice so site specificity became a burden. It became a fight to either re-contextualise my practice or to not contextualise it at all. So now an exhibition can only make sense in the relations between the works, they are autonomous pieces but they need the other works in order to gain that autonomy.

Amalia Pica interviewed by Jamie Stevens, Exhibitions & Events Organiser, Chisenhale Gallery, May 2012.