Waiting for the Revolution... in the Museum

Laurence Brasseur

A controversial figure currently celebrates her comeback to Luxembourg in the context of MUDAM's retrospective 'Sanja Iveković: Waiting for the Revolution'. The controversy relates however less to the artist than to her work *Lady Rosa of Luxembourg* (2001), which caused a furore at the time of its public display in the centre of the city.[1] *Lady Rosa* did not have to wait for a revolution; she instigated one.

Since then, things have calmed down. In 2012, *Lady Rosa* is back in town, but in the 'right' place: in the confines of a museum. No feelings running high this time. It seems like, in the museum, she is 'just' another work of art and unlikely to touch the population 'outside' – the vast majority will probably not find their way into a contemporary art museum anyway. Of course, *Lady Rosa* got the best place in the museum: right in the middle of the Grand Hall she cannot be missed, even by those visitors who might not want to see her. A little like during her display in the city in a sense.

To find the other works by Sanja Iveković, however, is a different thing altogether. The modernist aesthetic of the building does not allow bold signage, which is quite unfortunate, since the main body of the exhibition, less conspicuous but of considerable size, is shown in the basement.

The retrospective shows a wide selection of Sanja Iveković's oeuvre. For nearly forty years, the Croatian artist – born in 1949 – has been dedicated to a committed art dealing with both political and gender issues. This 'division' (if this can be said at all of Iveković's work) is followed by MUDAM in the exhibition's spatial organisation. The artist has been working with a number of different media, from video and installation to photography and collages, crossing the boundaries in form as well as in content between public and private sphere, subject and object. Iveković is not just the artist. In many of her works, as in *Tragedy of a Venus* (1975), for instance, she is author and product, observer and observed. The traditional distribution of gender roles in art – i. e. the creative male artist and the passive female subject – is no longer valid. Hence, in *Personal Cuts* (1982), her body does not serve as a representation of male desires, but as an active, and even disturbing, constituent of the work's meaning. This woman is not there to be looked at because of her beauty. She has something to say.

Like *Lady Rosa,* much of Iveković's work was conceived for the public space. The series *Gen XX* (1997-2001), where she placed the name of women who were prosecuted for their anti-fascist activities on photos of female models, was originally inserted into Croatian magazines. When art is meant to be a political act, it seems inevitable that it escapes the confines of a museum. Her performance *Triangle* (1979) took place right in the middle of the political environment she was criticising. It may seem difficult to transpose such context-specific works to a museum space and indeed, while the exhibition at MUDAM is powerful in itself, the modernist 'white cube' setting puts a bit of a damper on its political force.[2] On the one hand, the apparently 'neutral' context allows the visitor to concentrate entirely on the works on display. Nothing hinders his experience. Not even a small window with a view of the park can be found in the basement. It is completely

'Sanja Iveković: Waiting for the Revolution' is shown until 16 September 2012 at MUDAM.

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sealed off from the world. On the other hand, however, this 'decontextualisation' removes Iveković's art from the very world it was created for.

There is no doubt that the display is very aesthetic. Iveković's works, often in black and white, protrude from the white background. The large walls and spacious rooms allow the power of the objects to unfold completely. The scale and significance of photographs and prints as her series *Women's House (Sunglasses)* (2002), for example, appear simply overwhelming. Sounds from videos resonate in the galleries. Even cheerful disco music appears eerie in this almost cathedral-like space devoted to the 'religion of art'.[3] The labels are, in accordance with the museum's modernist aesthetic, discreet and only mention the title and date of the work. Nevertheless, an accompanying booklet gives extensive information. As most contemporary art museums, MUDAM probably assumed that Iveković's work is able to speak for itself and the booklet is there to provide extra details for the interested visitor.

While many of her works, especially those relating to representations of gender, can more easily be associated with the visitor's everyday experiences, they can certainly be understood without a lot of additional information. For the political works, which allude to authoritarian regimes, on the other hand, background knowledge is indispensable for the meaning-making process. The booklet provides this information and in the case of *Hiding Behind Compassion* (1993), the interview with Rony Brauman, former president of Médecins Sans Frontières, from which the title is derived, is displayed (rather unobtrusively, though) next to the installation. Interestingly, the context and press coverage of *Lady Rosa's* original display is documented extensively, but not in a way to disturb her formidable appearance in the Grand Hall. The visitor has to move to the Foyer in the basement to 'hear' her former critics' voices. Alas, while the visitor is reading these critiques, he/she is not able to see her. *Lady Rosa* remains immaculate in a timeless space.

Iveković's oeuvre is critical, political and even provocative. Her aims are democratic and egalitarian. Although MUDAM provides undoubtedly an appealing aesthetic framework for contemplation and personal engagement, the 'white cube' model of the contemporary art museum might be too 'aestheticising' for an extrapolation to a wider political and social context, since the cleanliness of the space does not really match the content of the works.

The context of her display then explains why *Lady Rosa's* return passed off so peacefully. It is almost as if those critics who pleaded for her removal more than ten years ago, are now giving her a warm welcome. After all, the public controversy of 2001 was also a magnificent publicity stunt: for Sanja Iveković, for Luxembourg and its art scene and, last but not least, for the *Gëlle Fra.* But I wonder what the reactions would have been like, if *Lady Rosa* had taken up her initial position next to her counterpart. I truly doubt that the reception would have been so positive. Clothes make the (wo)man. And the context makes the work of art. *Lady Rosa,* may she rest in peace... in the museum. ◆

Sanja Iveković: *Lady Rosa of Luxembourg,* 2001, Collection de l'artiste (© Eric Chenal)

1 Lady Rosa of Luxembourg is a replica of the war memorial *Gëlle Fra* (Golden Lady) (1923) by Claus Cito. In 2001, for the exhibition 'Luxembourg, the Luxembourgers. Consensus and Bridled Passions', Lady Rosa was erected in close proximity to her counterpart. This Lady, however, was pregnant and the plaques at the base were covered with words like 'kitsch', 'whore' and 'la résistance'. On the intense debate see Pia Oppel, "'Unsere wahre ‚Gëlle Fra' soll jungfräulich bleiben; jungfräulich rein auch unsere Geschichte'", in *forum* 296, 2010, p. 7-11 and Jürgen Stoldt, "Von der gëlle Fra an bunten Kühen vorbei zum Stadtmuseum", in *forum* 208, 2001, p. 47-50.

2 For a discussion of the 'white cube', see O'Doherty, Brian. 1976/1999. *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space.* Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press. In general, the 'white cube' refers to a mode of display favoured by contemporary art galleries and museums, where objects are shown in a supposedly 'neutral' space made of white walls, plain rooms and inconspicuous lighting.

3 Duncan, Carol. 1995. *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*. London and New York: Routledge.