FLAGGING POSSIBILITIES

Emma Cocker in conversation with Vlatka Horvat
All images courtesy of the artist

Vlatka Horvat is an artist based in New York. Her work takes several different media forms ranging from performance-based photography and video to works on paper and projects with text. Emma Cocker met with Vlatka to discuss her work as well as some of the ideas and concerns underpinning her practice.

Emma Cocker: Earlier this year I saw your work as part of the exhibition *Yes/No/Other Options* in Sheffield. The two videos, *Threats and Promises* and *Insults and Praises* (in collaboration with Tim Etchells) had this sense of cataloguing or trying to exhaust the possibilities within a given rule. These ideas seem to relate closely to other work of yours such as the photographic series *Hiding* and *Searching*, as well as a number of video works including *Restless* or *At the Door*.

Vlatka Horvat: My work is often structured as a predetermined system or framework inside which there's a more improvised, makeshift or provisional kind of activity taking place. The initial set of restrictions offers a way for me to map out or explore a range of possibilities – so rules are

established inside of which an investigation takes place. Pretty much all my works are manifested in a series so the framework 'holds' multiple pieces together. Each individual action, or image, or utterance within a series tends to work as an example or a version of the same task – they become almost like 'variations on a theme.'

I am interested in the repetition of action – the doing and redoing of something. The photo work *Hiding*, for example, depicts a person repeatedly hiding behind different objects, or in the video *Restless*, the protagonist is seen trying different seating positions in a large auditorium. The repetition becomes a way of making and compiling many suggestions about action, of offering a list of possibilities, of ways to do something – different ways and places to hide, different vantage points when seated in an auditorium. So there is definitely a sense of cataloguing, of compiling present in the work.

An effect of the listing in my work is that it produces a sense of a quest, a sense that a search of some sort is under way… a search for solutions, or attempts at enacting a task or representing a ges-
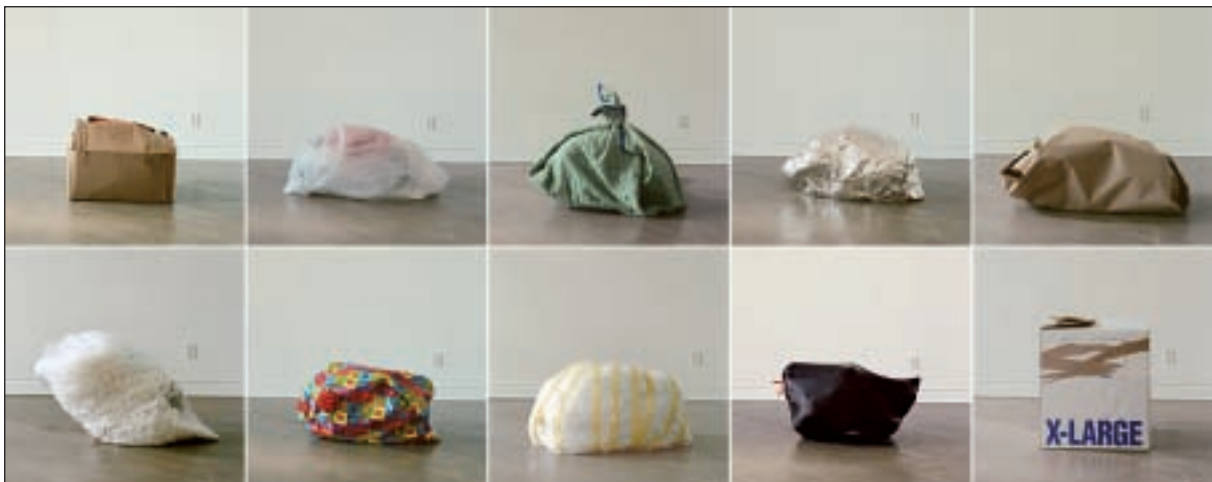
Top: *Hiding*. 2003. A set of 10 C-prints. Bottom: *Packages*. 2005. A set of 10 C-prints.

ture. Often though there is no sense of a beginning or an end point to this search; it seems to always be in process, always in the middle. It is as though you are encountering the work as evidence of something that has already begun, before it started being recorded or shown, and which will likely continue after recording stops. Both the format of listing and this sense of endlessness tend to lead to a dramaturgy that is quite non-climatic and flat – actions and images don't seem to lead anywhere, don't produce anything. What you are witnessing is a kind of a loop, or the same moment re-represented over and over in different permutations. There is no further conflict produced, but also no resolution provided – from image to image, from 'version' to 'version' the sense is that they all somehow have the same status in the series.

EC: What becomes interesting in terms of works in any series though is that there is potentially a sequential way in which you might come to it. Is there an order by which you must approach your work? In the photographic series, Hiding or Searching, there appears to be a linguistic or grammatical logic to the order.

VH: In ordering the photo series, I try to focus on the relationships between different images, which is not necessarily connected to constructing a trajectory of some kind. I often try to create sequences where something quite banal or straightforward is countered with something more far-fetched or puzzling; or something humorous is followed with something potentially uncanny or disconcerting. I'm interested in what happens in the collision of these disparate things, when you juxtapose images that don't necessarily 'make sense' next to each other, that produce quite different affects on the viewer. As a result, what the images are 'trying to do' is often muddled as they come across as undecided in whether they are meant to be funny or disturbing or serious or silly. The inconsistencies from image to image produce something that feels unresolved – that asks to be interpreted and made sense of.

EC: These double meanings deflect the possibility of stable meaning then. The random interplay between the possible and improbable in your work also defeats a sense of drama. There is a sense of setting up a scenario and then undoing its logic or intent. Each image undoes the 'stitch' of an earlier image.

VH: I think seriality as a form can engender this gesture of doing and then undoing – you can propose something in one image, for instance, and then propose something else in the next. What follows can disrupt or dismantle what was proposed previously. As a result, a coherent narrative cannot be extracted, as inconsistent or contradictory gestures can sit side by side. What I'm after seems related to a process of diagramming, a flagging of structures or possibilities rather than representations of something real. So the works are different versions of 'What if?' They are like sketches of provisional actions, possibilities which are flagged and then dismantled.

As I said, many of my works across different media – videos, photo series, text works, and a recent performance-based work, such as *This Here and That There*, all draw on a repertoire of possible ways to interact with an object or space – and those ways can differ and conjure up different sets of associations. For instance, in *Packages*, which depicts ten different ways to turn a body into a package, different associations or references are evoked when presented with a body wrapped as a present, compared to a body packed in a garbage bag, or bubble wrap, or packed into a suitcase. The range of connotations that each of these examples conjures up is obviously really different. This is where some of the inconsistencies found in the work emerge. Another thing the work often tries to do is embody contradiction – of wanting and not wanting something at the same time, of simultaneously saying 'yes' and 'no,' or of saying one thing while doing the opposite. I try to capture somehow the sense of being lead by several contradictory impulses, of attempting impossible feats and irreconcilable acts.

A piece like *Hiding* for example can be seen as an attempt to articulate the conflict between being in front of a camera and trying not to be there. There is a paradox inherent in occupying the space in front of the camera and then repeatedly hiding here. This paradox of attempting two contradictory, or irresolvable things at once chimes with my more general interest in representing what we might think of as difficult states, or states of in-betweenness – things like strained presence and hesitation and doubt and uncertainty, or a sense of waiting, changing your mind.

EC: I am interested in the sense of the possible combinations or permutations in the work, the sense of there being infinite possibilities like within the puzzle or game. There is this feeling of being overwhelmed by the possibilities within such a restricted palette or limited set of options.

VH: The simplest systems or sets of rules can produce extraordinarily rich possibilities for action or utterance. I'm drawn to using an impoverished language – a really limited vocabulary or something based on an economy of means – and trying to find different permutations and possibilities within it.

EC: In your time-based work – in the video works and photographs – there is a sense of real limitations or propositions being tested out, whereas in your works on paper there is more of a sense of fictive or unrealisable propositions being explored.

VH: I find the working on paper quite liberating. Working with video and performance-based photography, I was starting to feel that I was coming up against this restriction of the actual physicality of the body and what it can do. The range of possibilities of what you can deal with in photography and video – working in a way that's based in performance – is always going to be bound by what an *actual* body in *actual* space can do. So to a certain extent, what is possible to show or what is representable is limited by what is possible for the body to enact. In the works on paper, the category of what is possible has been ripped open, because it is not restricted by what a body can do. You can make the image on paper do anything you like!

EC: You are no longer testing the possibilities of a reality but ones that are more imaginative perhaps. They offer imaginative proposals or permutations for how one might perform in space.

VH: Maybe it's interesting to mention that all of my works on paper use images from my photographs or videos. So, there is still an economy of means in the sense that I decide to work with this restriction; I am just recycling my own images. The fact that my collages always start as degraded photocopies of my own photo work means they will retain the charge of photographic images, but will resonate in a different register perhaps because they are twice removed from the actual gesture or event of

an actual body in space. They are not for a moment pretending to be representing something real, something that 'happened.' Degraded as they are, they seem well aware of their own inadequacy as representation.

EC: They could also seem to try to recuperate some sense of value or meaning for waste. They become a way of allowing other meanings to be inscribed within a failed object – the 'out-takes' or leftover images.

VH: They do speak of the creative possibility of leftovers. A lot of the material I use in the collages are out-takes from photographic projects, these things that have been made and then discarded – things from the trash pile that are sitting there waiting for something to happen, waiting to be brought to life. There is a sense of reversing the negative into possibility – something that is discarded or has run its course is turned around – reinvented or re-imagined.

EC: The images are also quite ambiguous in that they signal both a sense of open or imaginative possibility, and yet also seem violent somehow. The body has been cut up and reconfigured in a different way. I am reminded of Surrealist, Hans Bellmer's *Poupée* series, where similarly there is the possibility of a double reading, where his work is violent and yet also signals a point where it becomes possible to imagine the body beyond the binary of male and female. I am interested in this idea of being 'both there'. This seems to be a model of co-existence, which is not to do with trying to synthesise two different ideas, nor reconcile different registers of meaning. There is sense of movement between the two possibilities that is important.

Anatomies, 2008. Collage on paper
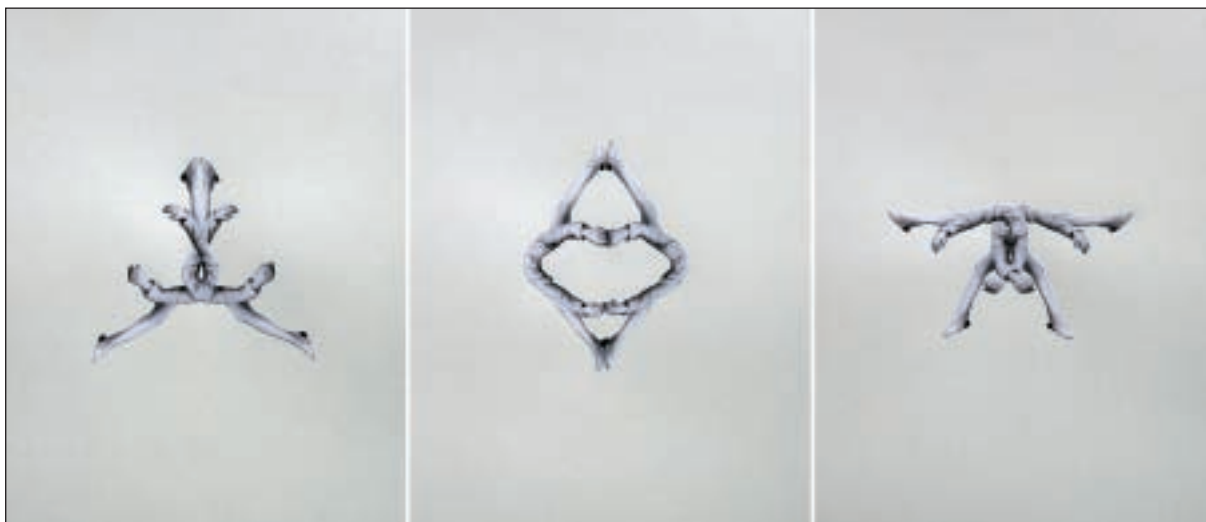
VH: There is always a tension there between the violence and the possibility. In the collages, there are these gestures of cutting up and fragmentation and taking the body apart, and yet they also come with a sense of playfulness and reconfiguration and repair – on the one hand the body is continually being taken apart and on the other, proposed as something new, something other than the normative (and normalised) body. I hope that these gestures are both present, allowing the work to be read in both directions – as violent or non-violent, as funny or not funny.

Someone looking at my work recently introduced the idea that there is a *cut in the real* in my photo work, where all the things you don't see – the missing head in the *Searching* series, the cut-off parts of the person that are behind the pillar in *Obstructed*, the protagonist's face in *One On One* images – have gone through this cut in the real. What you can see are references to something real, but what you can't see points to some other realm – a space that is not visible, or perhaps a space that is not picturable – which is perhaps the space of fantasy or imagination, or maybe a realm beyond imagination, beyond representation. While in the photographic works there is still an indication of both sides of this cut – a link to the *lived* experience – the works on paper seem to have fallen over entirely into this other place. Maybe this is just another way of talking about a space of possibility.

EC: I am interested in the sense of where criticality meets compulsion in your work. Here, I like the idea that what begins as a conceptual experiment or a trial seems to inevitably slip into something that is

more existentially or psychologically inhabited. There is always a body performing, and that body has to respond not only to the limits of the rule but also to the limits of inhabiting that rule. In much of your work, the protagonist seems curiously locked into a task in spite of the knowledge that it might fail.

VH: I think of the protagonist in many of these works – *Hiding* or *In Place* or *At the Door* – more as a test-pilot or as a stand-in or a demonstrator. There is a feeling that she is just flagging different possibilities or marking place or practicing for something that might happen at another time, or which might even be performed later by the real actor, or the 'real' person. But of course the rehearsal end up being all there is – the 'real thing' as it were. I am also very drawn to the idea of body as an object, as 'just another' element in space, interacting with other objects or elements of the built environment. As I said, the work often maps out the ways the body negotiates interactions with a set of objects within a given space, and within the self-imposed framework of action and task.

EC: Many examples of your work seem to be inscribed with a sense of self-imposed or Sisyphean labour. They propose a model of endless repetition.

VH: There are different ways to think about the idea of Sisyphean repetition in the work. Failure is definitely one way to look at it, but I think of it almost as a kind of performed failure, failure that is *made* to happen. In some ways the sense of failure arises from the foolhardiness of the tasks I set myself, or from the skewed logic that the protago-

nist depicted seems to use in approaching the tasks before her. She seems to continually be making misguided choices. For example, in *Hiding*, she is picking objects that are too small to hide behind or selecting hiding places that are inadequate to conceal her properly. There is a kind of stupidity in her approach, and this makes the sense of failure inevitable, rather than surprising. The repeated depictions – of the same kind of moment in each of the images within a series – frame them more as demonstrations of actions that fail, or as enactments of failure, of stuckness. They don't lead anywhere, don't produce anything.

In my work I try to focus on this state of stuckness, as an epidemic condition within culture. In the video *Restless*, for example, a camera has been placed on a theatre stage and films the auditorium. A lone person walks into frame and basically goes through this activity of trying all the different seats in the theatre as though she is trying to find a perfect vantage point, or a position that 'works' somehow, or that feels like the 'right' place. She gets stuck in the activity of endlessly trying different seats, with no indication that she's found one that is right. I think there is an existential aspect to this state of restlessness, of not being able to find a place. The ensuing stuckness creates a sense of waiting for something to happen.

EC: You also never wholly declare what the notion of success might mean; the sense of the goal or telos of the activity seems somehow removed. If you remove the telos or the sense of what success might be, then something like failure becomes difficult to determine, and the action exists perhaps within a different logic.

VH: I am drawn to exactly that tension – the work is based in task and unfolds within a consequent framework, but there really isn't a clear sense of a desired outcome or possible resolution. I think one thing that this tension does is to make the task itself seem questionable. The tasks I choose are hard to read in terms of narrative, or in terms of temporal or causal relationships – instead, the actions and gestures depicted are framed more as problems to be tackled, as questions.

I am fascinated by 'How To' manuals or sets of instructions for particular situations – what to do in

case of an emergency, or an earthquake for instance – and in a certain way I've been interested in borrowing a vocabulary from these kinds of guides. The sense of 'how to' is implied in my work, and yet any real context is removed, so you don't know what the work is instructing you to do. It seems to be demonstrating puzzling activities – such as different way to get under a table, or different places to hide, or hang off of, or stick your head in, or different methods for extinguishing invisible fires on the body – but because the context of the activity is removed, it is not entirely evident what exactly it is instructing you to do, what it might be preparing you for, or why you might want to know how to do these things in the first place.

It's also important that the notion of a goal in my work is rarely a fixed thing. Any sense of aim or objective for the tasks is not determined ahead of time, but emerges instead from the activity itself, from how the protagonist depicted approaches the task she's performing. It relates to the difference between playing and playing a game. In a game there are clear rules, definable objectives, goals and 'end points'. Play is more fluid. In play we give ourselves permission to move or reconfigure the goal, to make things up along the way. The guiding logic here is one of discovery. I think you are more open to discovering things that you didn't know you were looking for – different kinds of little triumphs or temporary pleasures are found in the process. In relation to the framework or the task being explored, there is also a pleasure in testing the limits, pleasure in seeing what is possible within what is permissible, or what is possible within a particular limited realm of options or a frame – whether it is physical frame or a conceptual frame.

EC: The issue of pleasure is interesting in relation to the idea of the ludic or the game. In play an activity has a certain pleasurable 'unproductiveness' or is performed as a gesture of waste, where there is no progressive meaning within the activity. It is done in a way for its pleasure, of for the pleasure trying or testing or finding or killing time. Theorist Roger Caillois speaks of a *vertiginous* form of pleasure in play, which is to with almost *falling* out of control.

VH: Yes. I do think that's a strong element in the work. The work seems very much poised between

these two things – feeling of 'out of controlness' and a sense of constriction.

In a number of video works there is a sense of continuation of action, which feels unproductive – a stuckness almost opposite to the sense of discovery or playfulness we were speaking of. You get this list of actions being endlessly, obsessively repeated. In *At the Door*, I am standing in front of a door and I am trying to come up with many different ways to say that I am leaving: 'I'm leaving, I'm going, I have to leave, I'm going NOW, I have to go, goodbye' etc. On the one hand the piece comes across as an attempt to make a catalogue of all the possible iterations of saying that you are leaving, or of announcing your departure. On the other hand, repetition without the action it's announcing – I'm never seen leaving in the work – gives it the feel of a rehearsal for an event of leaving, which doesn't actually take place. So the goal seems to continually be deferred. The work lasts an hour and as it goes on the tone of it starts to shift. The situation seems to get locked into a kind of unstoppable logic of a task that cannot be exhausted, or that loops on itself and repeats itself so much that it becomes like a *state of being* rather than a means to get somewhere else. At first the protagonist seems quite detached, trying different lines, weighing and considering options, taking her time. At some point it seems to fall over the edge and go into this sort of automatic rant, which is partly borne out of the actual frustration, *my* actual frustration of doing the same thing for so long, within such a limited framework. There are only so many ways to say that you are leaving so the variety gets exhausted pretty quickly and you have to come up with ways – while you're doing it – to keep going after you've already 'used' the obvious versions.

EC: It is perhaps not so much a case of the number of repeated gestures then, but rather a question of how you present an activity in order for it to feel as though it were being encountered in the middle of action. A sense of Sisyphean labour comes from an undisclosed sense of start and finish, where it becomes possible to imagine the action before and beyond the frame on view, beyond the fragment one is presented with. In some of your work, you seem to move between moments of performed trial and the moments

when the trial becomes more real. These fluctuations – the invisible struggles, and questions and uncertainties – are often invisible within a performance. The moments when it feels 'for real' seem to create moments of rupture. These moments are where a 'fray' occurs in the performance where it becomes unclear whether one is encountering a *performance* or whether it has slipped and this is now 'for real'.

VH: In my videos the distinctions between those positions are collapsed, or the clarity of where one begins and another ends becomes dubious. What plays into that for me is the inconsistency of investment, a kind of a wavering commitment to the activity being performed. At times in the videos it seems like the performer is executing the task as though it really matters to her, as though she believes that this particular attempt is going to produce a result – while at other times, she executes the action in a much more throwaway way – as though she is merely going through the motions or just marking place. These are the moments where she seems like a stand-in, someone not really invested in it, who is just flagging possibilities of action, proposing scenarios for events, making diagrams, rather than inhabiting and representing actual events.

Of course, there is a real person doing in front of a camera – an actual person engaged with an actual task, interacting with actual objects and space. So of course on some level at least the work has to engage with the fact of a real body in space, and the limits and possibilities that emerge in the encounter between bodies and objects. I am drawn to the real time aspect of working with

Parts Work. 2007. Collage on paper

video, because when you do something in real time all the stuff that happens in between what you wanted to happen becomes evident – moments of not knowing what to do next, of being stuck, or being frustrated, or making a mistake and dealing with it. The strategies that you come up with on the spot for dealing with those moments that you didn't account for or that catch you off-guard become transparent and those are, I think, really compelling moments in the work.

EC: It is not so much 'failing' then, as simply a different kind of result within the constraints of a situation. I suppose then failure starts to reveal the edge of what is permissible, where the limits are in terms of what is acceptable in a given situation. It is the perceived edge, or limit or logic that determines whether it is in or out of frame. I have been thinking about this idea of performed failure in the sense of a form of failure that does not remove itself from the expectations of a given society or opt out from a system, but instead breaks the system's rules from within.

VH: With many of the photo-based projects – which often depict a protagonist hiding, or covering her face, or trying to 'disappear' in the frame by blending in with the environment –there is a feeling that what is being done for the camera – as these are clearly staged photographs – is somehow wrong. The gestures or actions are somehow counter to what the camera and photography as a medium wants or expects you do. One of the things that I have been interested in is taking on very actively the restrictions of photography as a medium – playing or messing with its expectations and demands by not doing what a

person in front of the camera 'should' typically do, i.e. be exposed and visible. The wrongness of gesture somehow exposes the inadequacies of the medium. It, of course, cannot adequately represent lived experience, and it certainly cannot represent that which is not visible, things that can't be seen. The unrepresentable parts of lived experience – the stuckness, the feeling of in-betweenness, for instance – photography has no way of dealing with. Covering one's face in the act of being exposed can then be seen both as a challenge to the medium to represent what it cannot, and as an articulation of a certain refusal of its terms.

EC: There is a tension between a sense of a position that is resistant or dissenting, and one that is perhaps more affirming, hopeful or even utopian in some senses. It becomes a question of whether you rail against a system or try and stretch its edges a little, or push it in a different direction or try to redefine its terms and languages in a different kind of way. I like the sense of hovering between these two positions in your work. There is the line within the Sisyphean paradigm where the futile task becomes a way to transcend a set of absurd circumstances… it is doomed so you do it defiantly anyway.

VH: Yes, you try to twist its logic – make its limitations and problems visible somehow. Or you try to accept the proposition of the task – however absurd it may be – and do it as though it were completely sound, or ordinary. However absurd, far-fetched or foolhardy the proposition or self imposed restriction I am working with in a particular piece might be, I always try to feign a kind of stupidity and approach it in a matter-of-fact way. I think this strategy generates a sense in the work of things not being 'quite right,' and produces a particular kind of humour – humour that's somehow uneasy.

Further information about Vlatka Horvat's work can be found at www.vlatkahorvat.com

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DANCE THEATRE JOURNAL