

Vlatka Horvat interviewed by Summer Guthery for Disjecta catalogue, in conjunction with Horvat's exhibition *Excavations and Other Claims* at Disjecta Center for Contemporary Art, Portland, OR, 2013

Summer Guthery: Your installation takes as inspiration provisional barriers, as you make temporary spaces out of bits of wood, string, plastic. The room is filled with these small moments that become a larger landscape of positive and negative space with distance. Many of the barriers have a simplistic, "dumb" quality as they don't really keep anything in or out. How did you become attracted to these barriers and temporary spaces?

Vlatka Horvat: In the last couple of years I've made several projects working with gestures of partitioning of space – approaching it in different ways and with different materials. At Disjecta, I filled the space with provisionally constructed cordons, barriers, and enclosures, creating a set of distinctly delineated areas, which seem to crowd one another and which sometimes touch or overlap. I wanted to produce a sense of the same blueprint of space having been repeatedly claimed and usurped by different colonizing gestures.

I became interested in working with enclosures because as structures, they offer the promise of safety and protection, but can also be seen as a kind of a trap, in that they limit in very concrete ways freedom of movement, access, mobility... While my arrangements and constructions take clues from the 'outside world' – where space is heavily divided and sanctioned, claimed and cordoned off, full of borders – the kinds of barriers and enclosures I'm interested in building are decidedly quite pathetic... The provisionality of the constructions and their representational crudeness are really important to me – it's what affords them the status of 'propositions' rather than bona fide architectural structures. The makeshift quality of these divisions acknowledges the temporary nature of their claim on space, and speaks perhaps of the temporary nature of organized/divided space in broader terms – essentially flagging its instability and porousness. The ensuing sense of impermanence in the work suggests that things can be repositioned and reframed, that the built space can be dismantled, that the physical world can be organized and structured *otherwise*. Reorganization of space and spatial relations between objects that occupy it implies, I think, that a certain reordering of *social* relations is possible also.

In general, I tend to be drawn to things that embody a certain tension... That can conjure a set of seemingly opposite or contradictory readings or associations. The "unfixed" feel that some arrangements in my Disjecta installation have – the low-to-the-ground circle of planks prompted up on top of bricks, for instance – can make them seem as both remnants of 'something that was' and an unfinished stage of 'something that is yet to be' (completed or built "properly"). In terms of this sense of tension I mentioned, I think there's something in this business of making cordons and enclosures that has to do with psychology also... Something about the need or the desire for things to be contained and encapsulated – to know where the lines and borders between things are, between bodies, between ourselves and the world. I think – for me at least – there's both a pull towards that and a resistance to it. On the one hand, wanting to be contained (which is maybe linked to wanting to be graspable, wanting to be known - ?), and on the other, resisting becoming contained. So the apparent precariousness

and the instability of enclosures in my Disjecta piece somehow speak to that double pull. Or perhaps these flimsy and makeshift constructions embody a particular tension between a tendency towards erecting borders and constructing containers, and the need to push against them, to dismantle them.

SG: I like how the installation forces the viewer to make a choice, to move through tight entrances, step over low cordons. Your path through is choreographed in a sense.

VH: Yes, in some ways the interventions in space that my installation makes choreograph movement of people in it, but there are always several possible paths through it. As preoccupied as this installation is with making barriers and obstacles, I think it's worth pointing out that none of them present an *actual* impediment to movement. Barriers and cordons might suggest a path through the space, but if you were to want to go over a barrier rather than around it, none of these obstacles would actually prevent you from doing so. As a person navigating this space, you're confronted with the obstacle course that offers a set of propositions; not actual barriers that might prescribe and limit your movement options.

When working spatially, I'm often making circular lines through space – so there's lots of meandering and turning and looping and circling suggested by the shapes and lines of the installation. But as you said, you can always step over cordons, squeeze between things, go straight across, through an enclosure rather than around it. I actually like it when people do.

I should maybe mention that the installation is made without any nails or glue or connectors of any kind. All the materials and elements are precariously balanced – leaning against other materials, prompted up, stacked, layered, etc. – so there is a chance that things might fall if someone were to bump into them. The constructions are precarious and seem to be teetering on the verge of collapse, and I think you are aware of that as you move through the space.

When working on a large-scale piece that occupies the entire room, such as this installation at Disjecta does, I'm continually asking things like, how does the body fit here, how might a person negotiate these spatial obstacles, how does the partitioning of space impact movement, how does the organization of space affect what we perceive as possible or not possible in terms of our presence in it. I guess these – at some level at least – practical questions about movement raise for me much wider, and perhaps more abstract questions – questions about structures in general, about possibilities and limits within them, about strategies that we as individuals, and as groups, develop or use in negotiating those structures.

SG: What is your interest in these sort of "low" cast-off materials: recycled wood, bits of rubber and foam. How did you come to using them in your work?

VH: I like these materials partly because they are ubiquitous. Paper, cardboard, sponge, foam, tape, fabric – none of these are precious materials. They have a certain pragmatic everywhere-ness and everyday-ness which I like. As detritus of everyday life, they are disposable and flimsy,

and lend themselves to improvisation. Since most of the materials and objects I use are reclaimed or repurposed, they will always carry some residue of their past uses. As all found objects, they come with baggage, and with a certain mystery maybe also. You can never know all about them or about where they've been, but there is clearly a sense of their having had 'previous lives.' The materiality of reclaimed and found items, the range of associations they conjure, and their physical properties are all very important considerations for me. The materiality of things I use in the work, and what kinds of readings might emerge from the work are not separable from each other – these things are completely bound up together. In that sense, the work's resonance relies very much on its so-called 'poor aesthetic.'

That said, there's often been a practical reason for using cheap, cast-off materials, too. Let's say it's not unusual to receive an invitation to make a large installation in a fantastic space, but the catch is that there is no production budget... So you say, "OK, I'll go to some junk yards; I'll do some dumpster diving and see what I can find..."

Though to be fair, in my studio-based work, I'm also quite fond of using leftovers: remnants of work processes, discarded bits of previous projects, cutoffs from images used in other pieces, margins of paper, corners and edges of objects, etc. I like revisiting objects, images, and materials I've worked with before – re-employing something anew, transforming both its materiality and its resonances when you place it in new relations and contexts.

SG: Part of our conversation has been about the edges of these spaces, voids, holes. This is shared between the salon style wall of works, *Excavations*, at the front of the gallery and the larger installation of objects. Can you describe what about these lacking spaces attracted you?

VH: I'm often drawn to the edges of spaces – areas along the wall, the floor, points of contact (or collision) between objects, moments where things come together – or where they fail to come together "properly"... At *Disjecta*, my installation of densely packed divisions and enclosures pretty much colonizes the central space of the room: running on a diagonal across the middle of the space. In deciding to situate the installation in this central area, I wanted to create in it several additional middles, additional centers, as well as edges and peripheries. The gesture of excessively dividing and partitioning of this large space constructs in it multiple temporary zones, multiple insides and outsides – muddling in a way the clear line between what is inside and what outside, where one thing (or space) ends and another one begins, what constitutes the center and what periphery, and so on.

The wall works – mostly works on paper or wooden panels – investigate some of the same questions flagged by the spatial installation, only on a different plane. There are clearly many connections between the two bodies of work – both seem preoccupied with the gesture of making enclosures, holes, and openings – whether they're constructing circular shapes in space or on the flat surface of the paper – but they tap into quite different registers I think. The sculptural installation engages more overtly perhaps the political and social connotations of division and segmentation of physical space, while the wall works open towards readings that

are maybe more poetic, or more obtuse, or more puzzling.

Maybe the proximity of the wall works suggests additional ways to read the installation too, in that the wall works offer some more recognizable imagery grounded in representation – such as imagery of natural formations in landscape, of lakes, craters, volcanoes, for example, as well as imagery of the body – which allows us then to see these things in the sculptural arrangements also.

Or to answer this question differently:

Holes / empty spaces / cavities interest me because they simultaneously embody a kind of an absence and invite projection of that which is seemingly not there to be imagined / seen / conjured. The line traced around a hole, or a cordon encapsulating an empty space make a problem of the empty space they encircle, while simultaneously activating it.

Or even more simply: When it comes to holes or negative spaces, both a sense of failure and a sense of possibility are floated at the same time.

SG: We were really lucky to have you in Portland for several weeks to prepare and I enjoyed watching the installation go through dramatic changes as your tried things out. Can you talk about your process and how some of these decisions were made. It is also interesting to me to think how one decides when something is finished.

VH: That is such a big question. How do you decide when something is finished...? Sometimes it's clear quickly – you have a 'theory', enact it, and it works right away and you know (somehow!) that it's the right thing. But it rarely happens this way! More often for me, there's a lot of testing, trying things, building versions of the piece. You learn things through this process – about the space, about what it and things in it "want" and what they don't want, about relationships that you're making and the problems you're creating... You make one move and follow its logic to see where it takes you. Hopefully at some point you get to something that feels right, that works, and that doesn't collapse the logic you've been following. But ultimately, knowing when something is 'done' is a very unscientific process...

I'm not very good at imagining how things might work – I have to physically enact every idea. So I build endless models in the space, and spend a lot of time walking around in it, looking, changing positions, vantage points, stepping in and out of arrangements... Lots of repositioning both of 'stuff' in the room and of my relation to it.

Working on the project at Disjecta, I was very lucky to have had a lot of time in the space. So I played a lot before having to make decisions I would eventually stick with. I built many many versions of the installation before finding what it wanted to be. Concretely, I did a lot of carrying of super heavy cinderblocks, scaffolding planks, and wooden ladders across the space, moving and repositioning them, taking them out and bringing them back in... It was definitely a good workout!