

# Vlatka Horvat

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PROFILE >

VLATKA HORVAT'S WORK HAS HISTORICALLY BEEN MARKED BY REPETITION, simple puns (linguistic and visual) and rules-based durational projects: a performance of laying out and rearranging chairs in a pond in *This Here and That There*, 2007;

a video of the artist constantly changing seats in an empty theatre in *Restless*, 2003; sitting next to a partner and exchanging intimate insults and compliments through a camera in front of them in *Insults and Praises*, 2003 (in collaboration with Tim Etchells). If there has been a common thread it has been a tendency towards deadpan absurdity that reads as art practice as an endless 'knock knock' joke – amusing, then irritating, then mesmerising, as the artist insists on a repetitive set of call-and-response loops from the viewer or herself. It is the type of discipline that can only reveal itself as such over time and, for those paying attention, there has been a moment in Horvat's work over the last couple of years where the cumulative result of these deliberately slight gestures and actions has reached a kind of critical mass: a point reached (if not always successfully negotiated) by many artists, where their own historical practice now contains

both all the potential of a legitimate material in its own right and all the attendant danger of generating its own loops of self-parody.

For Horvat, perhaps the first signs of her own successful negotiation of this stage came with her recent solo show and performance at The Kitchen in New York. Having been 'knocking' at the door for some time now, Horvat has seen the recent intensification within her practice marked by an equivalent intensifying of attention in the city, which has seen her appearing at most of the stations of the cross of New York's influential not-for-profit scene (alongside The Kitchen there have been mini solo shows at Exit Arts and the resurgent White Columns, and a key group show at Artists Space), as well as several two-person and group shows in private galleries and now ongoing museum shows and residencies across the country. However the show at The Kitchen was perhaps Horvat's first chance to show a fully realised solo project and, perhaps, to give some clues to the future direction of her work.

The Exit Art and White Columns mini-surveys had been more typical of Horvat's earlier work, with one-liners mingling with the artist's then stock-in-trade of insistent revisiting of predetermined actions. The artist's body featured heavily, though more as found material than as subject, in keeping with an unsentimental economy of means that spoke as much to the pragmatism of Arte Povera or early performance art (Horvat's own roots are in performance) as it did to certain feminist readings of the body. A series of simple collages in which the artist appeared to be disassembled, limb from limb, only to be reassembled as a chair in *Body Chair (Charts)*, 2009, may have been superficially

Vlatka Horvat  
*This Here and That There*  
2007 performance





reminiscent of Linder Sterling’s woman-as-domestic-appliance sleeves for Buzzcocks, or even Martha Rosler’s domestic pop collages haunted by Vietnam and Iraq. However, rather than using radical juxtaposition to make a polemic point, Horvat opted to strip all further context from the final image. What remained were spare arrays that read as musical notations or perhaps Ikea instructions (albeit for self-cannibalisation) that were as rich in potential critical meaning as those other examples, but more ambivalent in the positioning of the body. And in other sequences the body was repeatedly hidden: wrapped in oversize packages in one photographic series (*‘Packages’*, 2005) and in other series hidden only in the sense that children are ‘hidden’ when they close their eyes in plain sight of you (*‘Hiding’*, 2003; *‘Searching’*, 2004). The artist’s head might be buried in a hedge, or her feet would appear from behind a slender pillar – a recurrent visual riff within Horvat’s work is the artist’s attempt to appear ‘offstage’ while still in the centre of the frame.

Such theatrical concerns, as well as that previously mentioned meta-idea of critical mass, run through *The Kitchen* show – with the artist setting up a series of expectations and conventions for the viewer that she then both plunders and confounds to keep the viewer off balance – neither wholly immersed in a theatrical installation nor comfortably viewing discreet sequential objects. Entering the gallery, the viewer appears to be in a slickly executed show of post-studio sculpture: an escape ladder is mounted uselessly high up one wall and bisected by another, itself immaculately disrupted by a ceiling fan suspended at waist height swinging wildly through a slot in the wall just wide enough to accommodate it. The final element in this opening to the show is half a chair lying on the ground as if emerging or disappearing into the floor. As the viewer moves deeper into the show they find themselves negotiating a thicket of work that refuses to be neatly resolved. Elegant works on walls collapse to the floor, stacks of cardboard and mirrors lean casually in corners, while simple animations are projected through prisms that disperse fragments of them across multiple other works and even the body of the viewer. If that viewer backs away, a motion-detecting chorus of mechanical birds rattle into life to heckle them. If they move forward to embrace the environment as a cohesive, if chaotic, whole, the elements seem to become stubbornly isolated again. And finally, as if to mock their predicament, a Pythonesque animation of a pair of legs is projected wandering agitatedly from one extreme of the frame to the other.

Two works stand out. In *Horizon*, 2009, a long scroll showing an image of an endlessly repeating forest skyline crosses the wall like a cardiac readout, before peeling away and curling to the floor – the two dimensional image of the sublime defeated by gravity. In *Table Forest*, 2009, the centre of the gallery is occupied by a large wooden theatrical panel intersecting, and thus supported by, a cheap table with a formica ‘wooden’ surface. The panel is covered on one side by what appears to be photographic com-

mercial wallpaper depicting a forest, but which on closer inspection reveals itself to be a digital collage that might best be described as elegantly crude. The flaws are imperceptible at first glance but unmissable as soon as they become apparent: trees partially duplicate, branches become trunks which become branches which become blurred edges. The absurd propping of the table and the equally inadequate printed wood grain on its surface conspire against each other in a bathetic representational stand-off. It suggests a new, looser, confidence in the way Horvat is playing with her material – that she has found her voice, and is delighting in throwing it. ■

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Vlatka Horvat  
*‘Hiding’* 2003

Vlatka Horvat  
installation view  
*The Kitchen* New York  
2009

