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Johanna Reed: [INTERVIEW w/ VLATKA HORVAT](#)

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Earlier this year, I came across the photography of Vlatka Horvat, a Croatian-born, New York-residing artist. Though Vlatka mainly uses photographic mediums in her work, I would hesitate to label her as just a photographer. With a Master's in Performance Studies from Northwestern, and a Bachelor's in Theater from Columbia College, Vlatka's photographs capture something visceral about a moment or a space. Her images typically depict an anonymous figure in a compromised state of dissection—a woman, searching for something, appears decapitated by the hole she's peering into—and the work feels much more like a document of a performance, or a conceptual tool that questions its own nature. I had many questions I wanted to ask Vlatka; her work seemed gleeful and melancholy at the same time, and it balanced on an uneasy line between photography and theater. I was curious to know how Vlatka saw her work, and what her intentions and curiosities were, how she approached the duality in her work. She was happy to oblige my questions. The following interview took place via email, from March to July 2008.

### 1. Wanting Something and Its Opposite at the Same Time

**This is That:** I was introduced to your work via the *Hiding* series, which I saw on a blog somewhere. Can you tell me a bit about how this came about for you, in terms of the inspiration? I like that you're playing with the true nature of hiding, in that you're never truly gone from the photos. There's always a sliver of you revealed—can you talk about this intent and its importance to the work?

**Vlatka Horvat:** The *Hiding* images show a person trying to (unsuccessfully) hide behind more or less commonplace objects—a bag, a coat, a chair, a fire extinguisher. These objects are often too small or the wrong shape to conceal her properly, so her body is always partially revealed, sticking out from behind these quite inadequate hiding places. We see only the legs, the feet, the hands, the back—clues of a person rather than the whole person. I was interested in the paradox of posing for the camera and at the same time hiding from its gaze; making an image while attempting to disappear from it. There is something foolhardy about that... I guess you can see these images as failed attempts to be concealed, or as examples/demonstration of hiding that doesn't work.

The only things consistently hidden in the images are the protagonist's eyes and face. So the logic she seems to be operating under is 'if I don't see you, you don't see me.'

In my work in general, I'm interested in presence—a person in relation to space and objects in it—how to inhabit space, how to negotiate 'being there.' In different ways I often depict encounters between a person and a physical location and the objects there. Often these focus on very simple, quite basic activities, such as hiding, searching, sheltering, ordering and organizing. The work is also preoccupied with the question of how we make sense of ourselves in the world, of having a body, of having contradictory desires and impulses, of wanting too much. In the Hiding images, this contradiction is revealed in that the attempts to be there are not to be there at the same time. For me, the idea of presence is always a kind of a problem, something uneasy and strained, which has to do with our desire to be revealed and known, while at the same time confronted with the fact that you really can never fully achieve either of those.

Maybe it's interesting to mention how these images (and most of my other photo works) were made. I use myself in the work—I have the camera on a tripod with the delay button, I frame the shot, click and then I run in. So while I'm setting up the shot, there's basically no one in front of the camera—I'm looking at an unoccupied frame. Similarly, when the camera takes the picture, there's no one behind it to do the looking—so there's always someone missing on one side or another. I think the images somehow echo this process a bit, in the sense that they try to speak about an impossibility of being in two places at once, about being present and absent at the same time. I think this points to a problem of the body (its limitations, its failures), but also to a problem of desire. Through repeated acts of hiding across my different works, I'm trying to depict the kind of desire that exceeds physical possibility, the contradiction of wanting something and its opposite at the same time.

## **2. Wanting More Than the Body Can Do**

**TisT:** I'm interested in what you mentioned in your response to question one: this idea that "presence is always a kind of a problem," and then the notion that at some point, there's always "someone missing" in the process of making your photos. Though your work is rooted in a kind of performance, and even installation, you use photography to document it. Is there a connection there, between the problem of presence and photographing it (or the absence of it)? How does photographing yourself in these works help you in trying to depict a desire that "exceeds physical possibility"? Going back to this idea of wanting to be revealed, how does a photo transcend or elevate, or perhaps complicate and obscure, physicality and presence for you?

**VH:** Yes—one of the central concerns of mine is this question of presence. My interest is framed through the body and its centrality in these acts and encounters, which are, as you point out, related to performance... from quite concrete, specific questions of how body occupies space, how it relates to other objects, how it negotiates tasks and 'being there'... all the way to the wider, more abstracted questions of having a body in the first place and making sense of its physical nature, its object-hood, its limits and possibilities, and ultimately its reach toward something that extends beyond the physical world.

I think that to yourself you are always, at least to some extent, not fully 'there.' There's always some aspect of lived experience to which you don't have access, from which you are removed. I'm not necessarily talking about the kinds of 'removal' that happen "in your head"—wanting to be somewhere else, getting lost in the space of fantasy, imagination, daydreaming etc.—though these can certainly be part of it. I'm thinking more of the way we can experience our bodies as something strange or foreign. In the work I try to articulate that sense of estrangement by depicting the body as fragmented, or taken apart, continually reassembled and reconfigured. Oftentimes it's a body on the edge of something (of failure, of collapse), or on the brink of something (of possibility, of change)—it's not clear which!—though in any case, a body in a more-or-less perpetual state of in-between-ness and transition.

When I say that presence is a kind of a problem, I'm speaking also about the limitations of the body as object that is bound by physicality, by laws of physics, by time, etc. Rooted in performance, my photo works, which are basically events/encounters staged for the camera, will be limited by what an actual body in actual space can do. 'What is possible' to depict in an image will be limited/guided/affected by what is possible for a body to do or enact. Doubling as the image-maker and the protagonist, one of the obvious, concrete limitations is that I am unable to simultaneously occupy the space in front of the camera and behind it. That's the kind of thing I mean when I say 'desire that exceeds physical possibility'—wanting more than the body can do.

### **3. Life Is Not Lived as a Series of Frozen Fragments**

**VH:** (cont.) After working with video and photography for some time, I started feeling like I wanted to be freed somehow of those constraints in my work; this is what initially prompted me to start working in collage. All my image-based works on paper (as opposed to text-based ones, which operate rather differently) re-use fragments of the body from my photographic or video projects—reprinted, photocopied, cut-out, etc. A nice thing about collage is that it opens up the category of 'what is possible' in representation. Being twice removed from the event, from something live, collage is not bound by the limitations of what a human body can do in time and space, but it can still try to speak about these things. The possibilities of what can be shown/done to/with the cut up or re-imagined body in a collage are not limited by what a body can physically do or enact.

Photography as a mode of representation fixes time, turning movement into stillness, so inevitably there's a fundamental tension in its relationship to presence and to lived experience. Obviously, life is not lived as a series of still poses and frozen fragments! And any moment that photography catches is always gone already, a fleeting moment lost.

I've been really excited by the possibilities of working with collage because, just as it is not restricted by the condition of actual body and space, it is also not constrained by the limits of photography and what the medium is able to capture or fix. Since it starts as a photographic image however, collage still carries something of the charge of photographic images. Of course

that charge will be different from proper photos, if for no other reason than their second-hand/homemade/degraded nature, a physical condition which marks the fragments in them as leftovers, as reused materials, remnants of something else.

Maybe the reason presence—any presence—is uneasy is because every presence is temporary...infested with some amount of absence, with a sense of that which is not present or seen. I guess being 'here, now' is always haunted by the prospect of not being here tomorrow. Another problem of photography as a medium (especially thinking about presence and performance) is its dependence on visibility and what can be seen. Photography has a hard time representing other modes of 'knowing'—things that are not visible or experienced by looking. On some level I suppose, the recurring gesture of the protagonist in my photos—her repeated hiding, concealing her face, vanishing into objects—can perhaps be seen as an attempt to playfully defy photography's demand to see, expose, reveal.

As images, many of my photo series enact a certain paradox: that of posing for the camera and at the same time evading its gaze; occupying the center of the frame while attempting to pass unseen. It's as though the protagonist of the pictures doesn't quite understand the expectations of presence in front of the camera. She occupies this space of visibility and exposure, but then hides there, which is kind of a wrong thing to do. And she does it repeatedly, from image to image, from series to series, so it seems to be more than a simple mistake; it's a persistent misrecognition of the situation.

Maybe it's worth mentioning that pretty much all my works take a form of a series. They function as multiple iterations of the same thing, multiple attempts at the same image or an action in a different place or with different set of objects/tools. I guess what draws me to working in a series is the fact that seriality explicitly reveals the problems of representation by laying bare the multiple attempts at something, by making you aware of the repetition, of a kind of obsessiveness or a struggle.

#### **4. The Hunt Is What Decapitates Her**

**TisT:** I'd like to hear about your process for the *Searching* series. What's interesting about the series, for me, is how it seemingly mirrors the *Hiding* works: there's an obscurity going on in both, though under different guises. What is your intent with *Searching*, both as its own entity and also how it expands the themes you're already investigating with your other work?

**VH:** Whereas in *Hiding* the protagonist engaged in repeated failed attempts at disappearing in front of the camera, in the *Searching* series she appears to be looking for something. It's not clear from the images what she's looking for, though one thing she is clearly missing is her head—it's always inserted inside objects or in openings in architectural structures. I suppose she could be looking for her missing head, or she might have lost her head while looking for something else. In any case, the hunt is what decapitates her: objects and parts of the environment become a guillotine, repeatedly chopping off her head from our view.

When I was first thinking about this project, I actually started from a phrase; I'm very interested in language, especially phrases that evoke an interesting visual image when taken literally, but also carry a rich metaphorical/referential range of meanings. So I started with the phrase 'loosing your head' and tried to picture it literally. I was thinking of the states/conditions in which a person is said to lose her head: in passion, in love, in shame, in distress, in panic (also as a punishment). Basically these states that can be described as somehow 'too much'—too much to take, too much to stay composed in the midst of them, to stay contained, too much to be able to understand and make sense of. Again, the kinds of states you can lose yourself in. The phrase also made me think of a hysterical woman, in the sense that a person who loses her head becomes a body out of control.

Here this body is very much an active body, doing stuff in the world, in spite of its headlessness (or maybe because of it)... There's humor and absurdity in that, but also something uncanny, unsettling and uneasy. The kind of humor that's borne out of ridiculousness and apparent stupidity of the image you are looking at, and yet it can produce a certain discomfort because it's also hinting at violence. It's part violence, part slapstick. I'm really interested in images that can be read as both funny and not funny, and as a viewer you can't always be sure which way to go.

In this work, again, the protagonist doesn't have a face, this is pretty much always the case in my different projects. Face being a point of contact, of self, with the world, an outward revelation of identity to the external world. So in a sense, we're denied knowing this figure, and she retains a certain anonymity.

## **5. A Body Attempting to Simultaneously Occupy Inside and Outside**

In all of the photo series I'm my own performer, but I'm not interested that she be read explicitly as me, with all of the particular psychology or autobiography that would come with that. I think of my own body in the work as a kind of a test pilot, a demonstrator, a stand-in, an example of a body and a person. Without the face as a marker of recognizable identity, the sense of the protagonist's identity emerges from her encounter with the world and the way she seems to approach activities. With the head being gone, the body is where the experience of the world is located—the body becomes a "thinking body"—and by extension, the sense of getting to know the world (and oneself) comes from the body, from this embodied experience.

The space itself is another thing I'm very much preoccupied with in the work, not only in terms of how our presence and interaction alters spaces, but also how space affects how we position ourselves in it, how it invites/makes possible certain things and prevents/forces us to adjust/make do/reimagine other things. The idea of the space itself (much like the idea of presence I mentioned before) is also a kind of a problem. Searching depicts a protagonist in a rather dysfunctional relationship to space and objects: she appears to be an impulsive figure when it comes to approaching spaces. She always goes head first, inserting herself into every

crevice, opening, hole. It's a body attempting to simultaneously occupy inside and outside – and as a result she seems to get stuck.

This sort of stuckness, this insistence on something in-between is very much what the work tries to represent. It's decidedly not interested in fiction or narrative as an end in itself. There are of course little narrative hints/fragments/hooks there, but it's not really possible to construct any kind of full, coherent story from image to image. Questions such as what is she looking for or why, what happened before or after moments we are looking at are deliberately not dealt with—all that the work insist on is these obsessive attempts to do the same thing over and over again in different places. In that sense, I would say that in *Searching*—and this is true with all my work—I'm not so much interested in depicting situations (in terms of fiction or narrative), but rather in representing conditions/states: in-betweenness, stuckness, doubt, inability, contradiction, failure, and a certain insistence to keep going, in spite of repeatedly coming up against these dead-ends.

## 6. Language As an Object

**TisT:** You mentioned your interest in language, and how *Searching* began as a phrase. You play with language a lot in your work, either literally, or more indirectly, via a title, for example. Talk more about what draws you to this. It struck me as connected to what you touched on here: "I'm not so much interested in depicting situations..., but rather in representing conditions/states: in-betweenness, stuckness, doubt, inability, contradiction, failure..." Your use of language seems to also investigate this idea of odd, uneasy, or ambiguous conditions, in that language is inherently, for lack of a better word, kind of sloppy, or malleable. Do you agree? Do you play with language precisely because it is so play-able, because it allows you a medium or point of entry to these conditions and states?

**VH:** A lot of my projects are organized around a set of self-imposed restrictions, a frame within which an activity takes place. The work basically gets articulated as a series of attempts to deal with those restrictions, to find the solutions and options inside this provisional framework. So the structure of the system always lives in a dialogue, or in a tension, with the improvisation and play within it...

Language itself is a system of course, but an open one, unstable, porous, one that can be bent and hybridized and reinvented... I'm really drawn to the edges of what it as a system can take or what it can do, trying to come up with ways to probe its limits, as well as play with the possibilities within them. Using language to communicate experience is always tricky, of course, because the translation of what we see or think or feel into words is inevitably imprecise. These limits are productive though, because the process is imprecise and nebulous, a statement in language can actually work on different levels, in different ways. What we say with words doesn't say or mean exactly and only what we may want it to say, but rather has the potential to mean more, or less, or to imply two or three or four things at once or to create confusion. So yes: as material to work with, language is really very playable. I'm excited about its potential to conjure things, to make things happen.

I tend to be drawn to approaching language as an object, in much the same way as I'm interested in approaching the body as an object. When I'm actually working with text as image (in my neon works for instance, or text-based drawings and works on paper) I'm interested in the materiality of language and in its possible physical manifestations—how is something written, what is the relation of the materials to what it says and to the space it occupies. There's often a kind of deliberate (playful) stupidity in the way I approach language. There is a particular literalness at play, whereby I seem to assume that a phrase or word is or should be manifested exactly as it says, following the logic of 'it is what it says.' For example, my neon work 'from behind' is made and displayed backwards, so that one sees it and reads and from behind. It's a strategy of focusing on the literal meaning or affect of a phrase; on identifying some aspect of its meaning that can be made tangible, or visible, while the phrase itself usually carries an additional set of meanings, references or associations.

Similarly, when it comes to projects using photos or videos, as I mentioned already, I often start from a text or a phrase that has at least two meanings and then attempt to actualize or enact it somehow. But my enactments for the camera aren't particularly clever or subtle; on the contrary, they are unapologetically obvious. The inversion of a complex verbal concept/state/idea into a simple image produces some sort of incongruity and humor... It puts a demand on the viewer to interpret it beyond the literal. I remember Barry Schwabsky writing in Artforum awhile back about the work of Hannah Starsky (I'm speaking from memory) he talked about her images demanding interpretation because the obvious meanings they offered were just too obvious to be the right ones. I like that thought: the really obvious and really literal and really blank become a means of introducing ambiguity into the viewer's act of interpretation. When the obvious meanings are too obvious to be 'the right ones,' the viewer cannot not question her reception, her reading of what can be seen (or what can be said).

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*Please visit [vlatkahorvat.com](http://vlatkahorvat.com) for more information on Vlatka's work. I would like to extend the warmest thank you to Vlatka for her time and effort with this interview.*

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