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Vlatka Horvat's repeated efforts at camouflage have found her buried in a suitcase, standing behind a door, cloaked in her own skirt, and—notable for its attempt if not its result—trying to conceal herself behind a sleek red fire extinguisher in her studio. In each of these iconic photographs from the 2003 series "Hiding," the young Croatian-born, New York–based artist remains partially in sight while clearly trying to hide. Each action epitomizes an instance of Horvat's ample cartography of failure: an infinitely expanding visual archive of frustrated objectives and desires. Her attempts to physically and conceptually occupy and engage representational spaces—domestic, industrial, political—are consistently defeated; she neither conceals herself nor experiences the existential "owness" with the world that she is after.

Further foiling her artistic efforts is her chosen medium. As a representational system that privileges visibility, photography makes it impossible for a subject to remain unseen; an image's very nature is to reveal the body's location within space. This detail does not, however, prevent our heroine from endlessly trying to trump photography's logic. Again and again, Horvat assumes an awkward physical position while trying to disguise her body behind the commonplace objects that invariably let her down: traffic signs, garbage cans, lamp posts, suitcases, cardboard boxes. Her exhaustive process of finding new locations in which to avoid being seen, while documenting herself in the act, is very much a game, yet her farcical staging of the visibility-invisibility dialectic has serious implications: it articulates the artist's misgivings about the ability of any system to capture and faithfully translate lived experience. Horvat's works, then, suggest the fragile, often disempowered position of the individual in a contemporary historical context marked by basic sociopolitical insecurity.

If we consider Horvat's biography, we might suspect that this search for imaginative solutions within an often illogical existence, creative improvisation within the limitations of an overarching system, is partially connected to growing up in socialist Yugoslavia during Tito's regime in the 1970s. Horvat pays tribute to her ideologically tinged childhood in Oaths and Partisan Songs from Memory (2003), a video in which she sings the songs that marked her formative years. With false starts and English interjections, the braided Horvat is seen wrestling with her own memories, trying to find the exact lyrics and melodies that elude her. Caught between two idioms—Croatian and English—neither of which performs perfectly, she negotiates the push and pull between different modes of belonging. A piece made the following year, Under the Table, similarly demonstrates the futility of conformity (and confinement), though with
more menacing overtones. A grid of C-
prints documents 16 ways in which a
body (the artist's own) can fit under a
table. The influence of Minimalist se-
rality on the work is explicit, but so is
the allusion to sheltering one's body in
the event of an emergency like a bom-
bing raid. The recent Balkan war makes
such a threat far from theoretical, and
imbues Horvat's overall oeuvre with
references that go beyond the formal.

And yet, despite these recurring po-
litical connotations, Horvat's work is
situated in a far-reaching dialogue
with art-historical precedents, which
she both absorbs and updates. Her
work resonates with the Minimalist
oeuvre of Robert Morris, the per-
formative work of Vito Acconci, and
the photographic self-portraits of VALIE
EXPORT in its articulation of the
strained relationship between systems
of representation, space, and the
human body; she gently mocks the idea
of ever reaching some ideal condition
of totality or closure. The anxiety asso-
ciated with this fragmented predica-
ment comes up in works like Out on a
Limb (2003), a video in which Horvat
balances on a tree stump on only one
leg; Here to Stay (2006), a site-specific
intervention made of leaves that spell
out the work's title before being dis-
persed by the elements; and Obstructed
(2007), a series of three photographs
in which the artist's body is hidden
(and revealed) in different ways behind
the white column of a gallery. But it
is perhaps best realized in Restless
(2003), a video in which Horvat com-
pulsively maneuvers between different
seats in an empty auditorium. Never
leaving the frame, she gets up, sits
down, and climbs over chairs, as if in
search of the perfect vantage point
from which to witness an unseen per-
formance. The body, she suggests,
exists in a troubled relationship with
both its own limits and its external
surroundings, one that seems to trap
the individual in an infinitely repeating
loop or a Sartrean à huis clos. In
this kind of unstable reality, Horvat
hinds, the viewer must accept that he
or she will frequently experience doubt,
anxiety, and uncertainty. The payoff,
if we deem it that, is the potential for a
mode of existence that, while precar-
ious, remains open to the possibility of
change. Relating to the sociopolitical
dimensions of her work, Restless em-
phasizes the centrality of the body to
the formulation of experience. While
states, governments, and art institu-
tions may try to discipline the body—of
the immigrant, the refugee, or the art
public—Horvat suggests that there is
always a physical aspect that will resist
such attempts.

This negotiation of the tension be-
 tween the body, space, and institu-
tional systems also informs her recent
project, "Repurposed" (2007), a series
of collages made for the "Ground Lost"
exhibition at the Forum Stadtpark in
Graz, Austria. In this work, Horvat
employs the blueprint of the gallery to
give it alternative uses (such as a public
bathroom, a boxing ring, or an amuse-
ment park). These proposals take on
preposterous dimensions as Horvat
includes the historical models for each
site on the same blueprint while also
filling it with fictional elements and
inconsistencies. Although no institu-
tional space could possibly accommo-
date a transformation on this scale,
she is pointing to contemporary situa-
tions where such attempts have been
made. For example, even as she oper-
ates within the discourse of institu-
tional critique, Horvat is simultane-
ously reflecting the plight of war-torn
countries like her native Croatia, where
many public places were transformed
into temporary lodgings for refugees
during the war in the 1990s. Through
this additive gesture of collage, she
makes visible the potential of spaces
whose identity has traditionally been
considered fixed, reimagining them to
such an extent that their physical
boundaries begin to crumble. More
specifically, and echoing the ideas of
Michel Foucault, she is suggesting that
the dispositifs, or grids of intelligibil-
ity, through which we think about
space, are both historically condi-
tioned and open to questioning.

This critique of the role of space in
shaping identity informs Horvat's oc-
casional collaboration with artist Tim
Etchells. In a project titled To Bring
Down a House (2006) at the Kunsthau
Graz, Horvat and Etchells in-
stalled a fax machine in one room of a
modular house, which they named
"Nothing Good House." Several times
a day for a month, he from Sheffield
and she from New York, they faxed in
drawings, collages, diagrams, texts,
and proposals on how to destroy the
concept of "house." The accumulation
of these cryptic faxes formed the basis
of the installation. The proposed in-
terventions ranged from violent acts
to mildly annoying—even puzzling—
scenarios, some feasible, others im-
 plausible: schemes included "over-
crowd it," "unleash termites," "drop
bombs," "remove the roof," and "fill it
with bad memories." By the end of the
month, the walls were covered with
imagined situations and antagonistic
directions. Echoing Gordon Matta-
Clark's physical interventions into
built space, Horvat and Etchells
achieved their ruinous objectives
through words and drawings alone. In
this double assault, the frame of the
exhibition itself was subtly under-
mined, drawing the viewer away
from the notion of the house as a symbol
of coziness and domesticity and into
a more complex and contradictory ex-
perience of inhabitable space as shelter,
trap, and target.

The cumulative effect of Horvat's
work is to wryly and provocatively de-
stabilize the monolithic reach of sys-
tems of representation. Most notably,
her works reveal the tenuous relation-
ship between social space and the con-
struction of the individual. Emblem-
atic of this project is the series "Search-
ing" (2003–2004), which consists of 11 C-prints showing Horvat in
different locations, peering into a va-
riety of objects, her head always ob-
scured (e.g., in a plastic bucket, an
overgrown hedge, or a washing ma-
chine). These absurd scenarios, which
employ photography in a reflexive pro-
cess, may seem to doom Horvat to the
perpetual enactment of physical and
conceptual self-containment, forever
captured within the limits of a physical
site, an ideology, or an artistic medium.
Yet there is something about the works'
deafening humor that interferes with
this closure. By reaching for impro-
bable frontiers, Horvat creates a tem-
porary disruption in the realm of rep-
resentation, a gray zone of difference
where nothing—neither identity, nor
landscape, nor their ambiguous rela-
tionship—is settled.

For more information on Vlatka Horvat,
turn to Index, p. 110.