



Spatial Matters: A Conversation with Vlatka Horvat

What can you achieve recontextualizing an everyday object that you cannot in creating a new object?

I like found objects because they have history – they come “preloaded” with a range of associations and connotations. My work often relies on the fact that objects I use carry strong referential resonances and loads of cultural and historical weight. A newly created object doesn’t have these qualities. It’s an invention. A found object is already something – a set of properties to work with and against. It makes the work and at the same time offers friction, resistance – which is interesting to me.

Things I’m most drawn to are commonplace objects, but however everyday, they are never neutral. Time and again in my work we see doors, ladders, chairs, tables, rulers, boxes, bags, suitcases, fences – all things that are full of signification, that can be seen as signs, as well as residues and indexes of various forces, power dynamics, processes in the world. I’m struck by the fact that frequently they also happen to be objects that move, or rotate, or bend, or fold, that have some element of mobility or that are used in processes of travel, exchange, and access. I think any attempt to read these objects will be linked directly to questions of place, agency, and use.

In my work I often treat these simple, generic objects as something other than what they 'usually' are, placing them in a "wrong" situation, or playfully misusing them. Taken together these strategies tend to disrupt the logic and expectations concerning the habitual use of a particular object and turns on its head normative relations that guide, regulate, or prescribe objects, how we use them, relate to them, what we can and should do with them, and so on.

Displacing objects from their everyday use and recontextualizing them is a way to redefine how we read them. When I'm combining objects or placing them in dialogue with each other I'm also trying to ask questions about the relations between two or more inanimate things, between objects and space, or objects and their environment and frames they appear in, and about the relations between objects and human beings.

Making the work, I inevitably want to intervene on the objects I use in different ways. Often I'm altering them by cutting or severing them, connecting and merging them with other objects. The reconfigured object tends to be freed in part from its normative use, function, and context, allowing it to be recast as a new thing – so a range of possibilities for what it is and what it can be are opened up. An everyday object can be made strange in that process, or it can become abstracted, even turned (back) into a kind of a material...

How do concept, materials, the viewer's experience, and the exhibition space factor into your creative process when making a new work? Are any more important to you than others?

All these are important to me to various degrees in different works and to a large extent they all go hand in hand. I don't have a single fixed way of working, a process whereby all the projects operate the same way. Some works emerge from my encounter with a room and as such they may engage directly with the physical space of the gallery or a found space. Other works are developed through a process of research in the studio or in the world beyond it. Sometimes works or projects start from a loose concept, a framework of ideas that I'm thinking and working through which will guide the research and the experimentation in the studio. Ideas and approaches will often change, or shift and get crystallized in the course of working with objects and materials.

*Many of the projects I've done recently explore gestures of reorganization of space. Recent works such as **This Here and That There** (the 8-hour performance piece with 50 chairs), **To Bring Down a House** (a collaboration with the artist Tim Etchells for Homeworks Festival in Beirut), and **Here to Stay** (in upstate New York) could be said to have started from a kind of an initial idea... while the three recent room-based projects, **Or Some Other Time** (for the Kitchen in New York), **For Example** at Istanbul Biennial, and **To Go On** for "Greater New York" at MoMA PS1 in NYC, all engaged in very different ways with an actual exhibition space – in a sense they are projects conceived for, or made in collaboration with, a specific room.*

When working with space, a room to be entered and traversed through, the question of the viewer's experience inevitably comes in as you try to map the possible ways through the space and imagine and anticipate how different order of encounter with disparate elements in the room or in a found space might affect the viewer's experience and engagement with the work.

How do you use your work to define an area in terms of its physical space? and do you use the physical space as a springboard to encourage the viewer to ponder larger intellectual questions?

In my work I'm often drawn to investigating the limits of a given space. I'm drawn to the edges, to the walls of rooms, floors, ceilings, to spaces/places where one thing ends and another begins, or where it's difficult to discern where that change between things happens – borderlines, skins, edges of objects, edges of rooms. I often treat the edges of the physical space as sites where something is interrupted, cut short, or literally severed, so that the point where two things meet, or where one thing seems to disappear into another, is itself made a problem of. Hopefully that invites broader questions about borders, and edges, and limits. I'm thinking very much about the environment (built environment, cultural context) and how this limits, traps us – but at the same time presents opportunities for invention, transformation, or escape.

*One of my works included in **Run and Tell That!** is a piece titled **Wall Fan**. For this piece I had a custom wall built and embedded an industrial ceiling fan in it, spinning inside it, its blades sticking out through a special slit in the wall, at the height of an average table. In a sense, the piece functions as a kind of merger of two objects – a wall and a fan. The object here simultaneously occupies two "rooms" as the blades of the fan spin through both spaces on both sides of the wall. There's also a kind of "drama" to this spinning fan – precarious, absurd, and menacing as it is – and I think people are very much invited to think about what might happen if they stepped forward and into it. There's an imaginary act of severing – it appears that the fan could cut your body off just above your thighs, where your legs meet your pelvis.*

What interests me is the way that the trapped-but-spinning fan activates the space and people's presence in it – by unequivocally delineating an area that's "off", as the blade clearly draws a line in space beyond which you cannot approach the wall, as well as by imaginatively performing this cut where your legs off meet the top of your thighs – which of course has implications for your sense of mobility and movement.

*I'm very interested in this question of presence, the often difficult or problematic relation of a human figure to its context, to frames – both physical and conceptual. I'm also interested in the complex sets of social relations constructed in relation to, or emerging from, spatial relations between objects, bodies, and elements of the built environment. My sculptural works, such as **Wall Fan** and **Ladder**, which are both presented in this show, don't depict a human figure, but nonetheless the body is what is under investigation. The body is proposed as the problem and the question. In these works, very often because of the work's economy and placement in space, the body the work is pointing to is that of the viewer.*

For me, the investigation of space always includes a question of 'how can this be inhabited,' 'how does body fit here,' 'how does body move or behave here.' By extension, further questions implied might be, 'what can happen here,' or 'what is possible here' – both of which are questions that are prompted by the situation and by the limitations and possibilities of an actual, concrete space I'm working with, but which at the same time reach further afield into areas way beyond the confines of the exhibition room. These are not only practical questions concerning physical space; they are also always existential questions, questions of social order, political questions.