

Stephanie Rizaj.

The Colour of Serendipity/A Critique of Everyday Life.

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The serendipitist finds valuable things without looking for them. This notion beautifully captures an important dimension of Stephanie Rizaj's work. Fragments of personal lives, elements from the everyday, found objects and fabrics, places... These are not just presented as readymades but carefully worked on, with a great sensitivity to colour and texture, combined with a sharp, critical eye.

Engaging in this kind of exploration requires curiosity, an open mind, a willingness to embrace chance, and intuition. It takes time and patience, thus promoting a slower and more spontaneous practice – a breath of fresh air in this fast society where planning, decision-making and self-affirmation are the norm. This further results in a surprising variety of outputs. While Rizaj primarily focuses on installations, she has also created videos and performances, and has presented what we could call 'made objects' – objects that may appear ordinary but are distinct from found objects, given that the artist fabricates them. Through her works, Rizaj brings mystery to the commonalities of the everyday and interrogates them. They are stills of a multifaceted process combining coincidence and deliberation, like signs hinting at complex, problematic realities that usually remain hidden.

I Love Michael Asher (2018, 140 x 200 cm) is an installation in which glass panels hang from the ceiling from steel chains, forming a table with seats around it. The panels contain heating textile and are connected to the electricity through a number of black cables, gathering together next to the multiple black power strips, with their red indicators lit. On the glass table, a single red can made out of wax is melting away. The paradoxical combination of cool glass and steel, and warm wax and lights creates an uncanny atmosphere, while the sensible heat suggests both comfort and destruction.

The title of this work evokes the homonymous exhibition by Isa Genzkin (2016, Hauser & Wirth, Los Angeles), who was influenced by Michael Asher's work. Genzkin and Asher both examined the formal qualities of sculpture and of institutional settings, and presented the viewers with alternative – often discomfiting – environments, in order to offer critical tools to navigate the contradictions surrounding us. Both artists are often associated with institutional critique, an aspect that is also present in Rizaj's work. We can recognise this kind of critique in the early Untitled (Curtainwall) (2015), which features large curtains (140 x 140 x 300 cm) with the windows and radiators of a room digitally printed on them, installed inside a windowless white cube, which appears as cold and sterile. The 2016 performance How to Be Trained as an Artist also presents an institutional critique, by blurring the relation between art and its outside. In this performance, three individuals are strolling around dressed in uniforms made from Turkish towels of different shades of soft blue, while within the same venue there are rectangular, steel structures, painted in the exact same shades of blue, as if the subjects of the artwork escaped the frames in order to walk around casually, just like everybody else.

We can also associate Rizaj's work with Henri Lefebvre's idea of a critique of everyday life.¹ According to Lefebvre, our everyday expresses the economics, the politics and the values of the society that we live in, and it is being colonised by capitalism. As a result, accepting this everyday means accepting the existing

¹ Henri Lefebvre, *Critique de la vie quotidienne* (3 volumes: L'Arche 1947, Gallimard 1968, L'Arche 1881).

production relations, political superstructure, and values, and not being willing or able to imagine alternatives. In this way, the French sociologist shows the importance of everyday life, which is often neglected and considered unimportant.

Boiling Loop (2019) strongly resonates with this idea. In this installation, we can see Turkish coffee being brewed in a red cezve on a flatscreen. Next to it, there is a lounge chair and an object in the shape of dumbbells, both of which are made out of steel, glass and heating foil, and are connected to the electricity, producing heat. At first sight, the lounge chair, the dumbbells and the flat screen seem to interact well with the idea of brewing coffee. They suggest that, while waiting, one could lie down, do some weight-lifting, or watch TV. The black and red of the real-life objects come back in the cezve and the stove on the screen, and the objects give off heat as we imagine the stove and the coffee do. However, these objects actually stand in stark contrast with the rudimentary, time-consuming and labour-intensive brewing method, which requires one to stay present and pay attention not to spoil the coffee. Together with the notification on the screen that the battery is low, this produces an awkward, almost surreal contradiction, raising questions about labour, technology and free time. Boiling Loop shows how new technologies pose the problem of everyday life, of its value and fragility. By showing a Turkish coffee maker-together with the ironic low battery notification, Rizaj hints at the fact that different regions, different individuals, or different domains of life follow different rhythms of change, and that progress spreads unevenly, which can lead to tensions and absurdities. What is more, this installation embodies the idea that technological progress does not always mean an improvement in the quality of our everyday lives, and that the everyday constitutes both the object of and a powerful tool for critique.

Rizaj further made three noteworthy films. As if Biting Iron (2019) starts out with the green landscape of a Kosovan forest. A female voice affirms that women are seen to be surrounded by walls and that they should unite to move forward and break these walls. She associates the idea of being surrounded by walls with an Albanian saying about biting iron. Meanwhile, a deserted brutalist building appears in the forest. Different stills show the impressive building, which is in ruins and, in certain places, covered in green moss and plants. Concurrently, women are walking through the forest, approaching the building, and then starting to push against its concrete walls. Not long after, we see a multitude of women, pushing against the same huge wall together, suggesting unity and togetherness, strength and hope – but also struggle, hardship and despair, as the wall these women are pushing does not move.

Traces (2020) takes us to Marseille. It goes back and forth between the rugged landscape of the coast and a popular neighbourhood. The silence of the coastal landscape, its warm oranges and whites, and its rugged texture contrast with the smooth metal and plastered surfaces of the urban environment, with its cool whites and greens, and with the noises made by playing kids. Two children introduce the neighbourhood and talk about their dreams. We see them walking around at the foot of a tall building and running up stairs, as the sounds and images become more and more dreamlike, to finally melt together with a very white, almost lunar landscape by the sea. Now the kids are in a boat, then walking through the rugged coastal scenery. There are stairs and abandoned buildings, and we hear an enigmatic tune and muffled sounds, until we dive into the sea. The camera slowly swims through the water. There are rocks, little fish, something that looks like an amphitheater, and other constructions in the sea – all deepening the surreal, dreamlike atmosphere. What if Atlantis was real? The legendary city of Atlantis, which Plato depicts in his *Timaeus* as a highly advanced civilization that perished due to moral decline, is often associated with

Thomas More's fictional utopia, which he describes as an ideal society characterised by harmony, equality, and justice. These places illustrate the complex relation between idealism and reality in human societies. In a similar way, *Traces* questions the dream of social and natural harmony, and hints at the intricate interplay between aspirations for perfection and the societal realities we face.

Welcome to Your New Life (2022) features a woman's voice, mechanically giving instructions on how to disappear – to flee, and start a new life. While we hear these instructions, the camera rotates, showing the interior of a bar with orange walls, which looks familiar and cosy but also somewhat gloomy and nostalgic. A senior man in a blue T-shirt appears. He is dancing in the bar, alone. As the instructions become more and more inhumane, the image turns around faster and faster. 'Be prepared to experience how wonderful and cruel human beings can be. Don't run to any predictable place. Leave town and keep going until you're unable to. To them you are nothing more than a faceless fugitive...' The man keeps dancing – he smiles and looks as if he is enjoying himself. It is worth noting that the instructions that we hear are from a real instruction manual for starting a new life² and that this work is based on a true story of a close acquaintance of the artist. Through her portrayal, Rizaj is able to evoke the paradoxical nature of the experience of exile, which is at the same time deeply personal and dehumanising, and which is both an extremely isolating experience and one that is shared by many.

During the same period, Rizaj also made two series of sculptures that resemble ordinary objects. We could call them 'suggestive sculptures' because, through these ordinary-looking objects, they make us imagine a certain reality, confronting us with questions that are often overlooked. *Untitled (Existentialism)* (2021) features the typical chest and shoulder straps of hiking backpacks made out of leather, textile, plastic, metal and embroidery in different greys, blues, and black. The shoulder straps are padded; they look like they are comfortable and provide support and stability. But instead of being attached to backpacks, they are tied to the wall, suggesting freedom and travel, but also being stuck. We can imagine being trapped and unable to move with these straps on, which brings out the irony in the dreamy, existentialist aforisms that are embroidered on them: 'space melts like sand, running through one's fingers;' 'there may be more beautiful times but this one is ours.' In a similar vein, *We Imagine it Magical* (2022), a videoinstallation and performance around *Traces*, contained a pair of metal sandals, which would be cold, uncomfortable and heavy, and in which we would be unable to walk, as if nailed to the ground.

In her original take on the self-portrait, *Selbstportrait* (2021), Rizaj presents us with a number of labels usually found on industrial clothing, with black letters and numbers printed on woven textile. She uses their typical formal structure in order to describe herself in terms of identity politics, with the care instructions one should follow when handling her: 'Shell: 100% female 100% white ... if provoked highly aggressive.' This again points towards an uncomfortable kind of contradiction or tension: it suggests that the subject is sensible and requires particular care, but also that she is an industrially produced object. Personal aspects are related to dimensions of the capitalist system of production and consumption. This creates a tension, and it makes us wonder if it is because of her place within the global system that the subject requires a certain care and becomes aggressive when provoked.

² Seth Price, *How to Disappear in America* (Leopold Press, 2008).

Lastly, the striking, layered installation *All Their Lovers* (2022) hints at a complex entanglement of societal issues – social, political, economic, domestic and emotional. This installation, which is variable in size, features soft orange plaster pillars, digitally printed labels, and a number of bomber jackets, made from recycled textile. This installation again invites a critical examination of the often overlooked implications of everyday life, by highlighting how our daily decisions imply economic, social, and political factors, even when we are unaware of them.

The printed labels tell stories of people, describing their 'shell' and their 'lining', as well as important aspects of their lives. They tell stories of immigration, of poverty and of disappearance, coloured with shame and beavement, but also animated by pride, love and gratitude. These labels seem to point to the women who made the bomber jackets, and whom we would normally not think of. As Lefebvre observes, in our contemporary urban environments, the labourers that provide the essentials for our subsistence – notably food and clothing – remain invisible and unrecognised. This anonymity, and the disconnection from the skills and craftsmanship that once defined these industries, fosters exploitation and alienation. As Karl Marx already articulated, the labour of the proletariat generates wealth. Yet, paradoxically, the harder and more efficiently they work, the more impoverished they become, because the division of labour perpetuates and increases inequality. Rizaj's installation shows how the class struggle is not longer a local concern but an ongoing, amplified conflict on a global scale, which is particularly evident in the production of items like bomber jackets, which embody the complex interplay between consumerism and labour exploitation.

What is more, the recycled fabric that the bomber jackets are made of – the greyish fabric of moving blankets – suggests cheapness and waste. Just like the printed labels, which often cover many different languages, this evokes the massive waste the clothing industry generates by overproducing cheap and low-quality clothes. This results in the a global overwhelming overload that we struggle to manage, especially since many charities no longer accept used clothes, and shipping these to so-called developing countries tends to cause more harm than good. This overproduction goes hand in hand with exploitation, bad working conditions and an ever-growing inequality.

The way the identical jackets are laid out in the space – hanging from walls and lying on the ground, as they might in real life – brings to mind their owners, as a multitude of uniform, standardised subjects. This points to the fact that capitalism does not just alienate the worker but also the consumer. What Lefebvre observes regarding the Levi's blue jeans can just as well be said about the iconic bomber jacket: ironically, it is both a symbol of freedom, style and self-expression, and a sign of standardisation and alienation. To be sure, as Félix Guattari remarks, capitalism does not just produce goods and workers. It also produces standardised subjectivities, influencing people's opinions and desires, their styles and their dreams, and structuring their free time and everyday life.³

While evoking difficult questions around the clothing industry and other institutions of our society, Rizaj's work shows a deep appreciation for manual labour and for the artistry behind well-crafted objects and garments. Just like the backpack straps of *Untitled (Existentialism)*, the bomber jackets of *All Their Lovers* are handmade with great care and detail, contrasting sharply with most of the existing clothing, which is produced *en masse* by machines.

³ See for example *Les trois écologies* (Galilée 1989; English translation: *The Three Ecologies*, The Athlone Press 2000) and *Cartographies schizoanalytiques* (Galilée 1989; or: *Schizoanalytic Cartographies*, Bloomsbury 2013).

Rizaj's work shows the importance of labour and of our daily existence. The questions it raises, which are complex and multifaceted, point to the need to adopt what Guattari would call a new, ecological and ethico-aesthetic paradigm. This perspective acknowledges the intrinsic interconnection of the different dimensions of our world, while fomenting diversity and avoiding the uniformity of aesthetics shaped by consumerism and industrial production, which demand standardisation and lead to widespread devastation on many different levels.