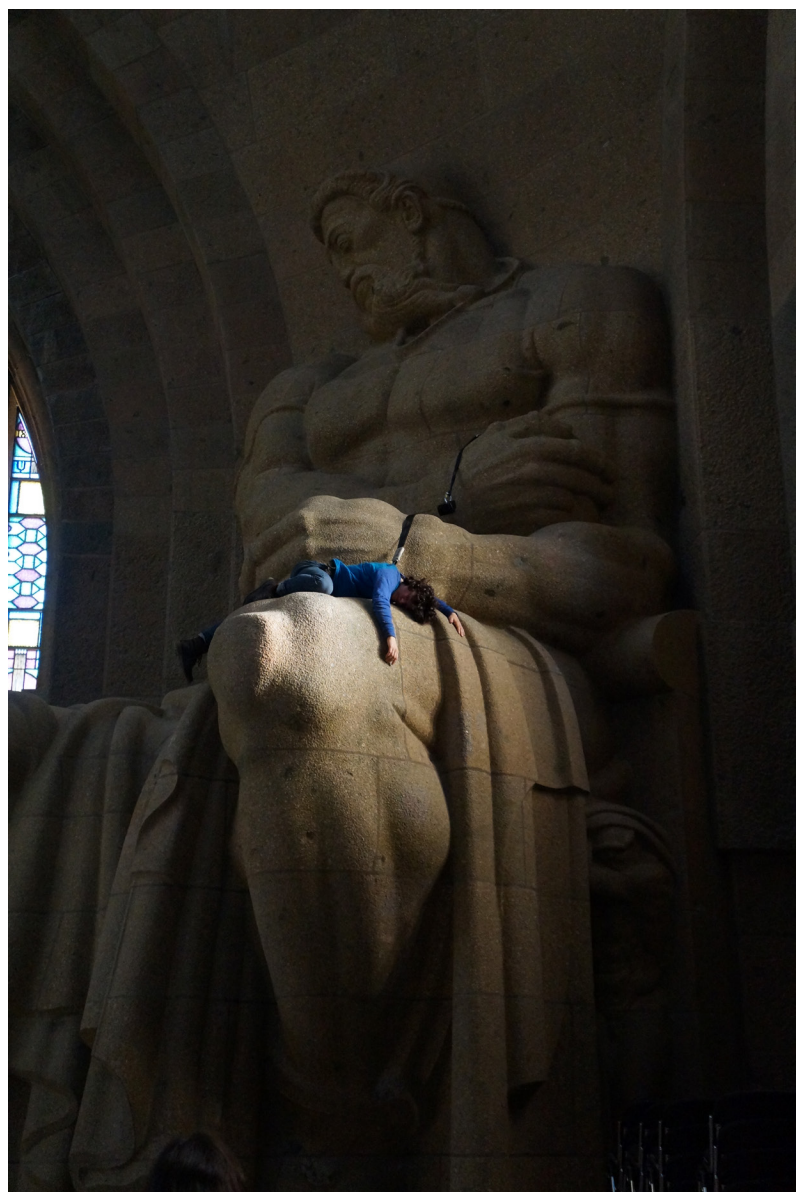


Interviewed by
Sandra Teitge

Alexandra Pirici and Manuel Pelmu, **An Immaterial Retrospective of the Venice Biennale**, 2013. Enactment of **Germania**, by Hans Haacke, German Pavilion, 45th International Art Exhibition: Cardinal Points of the Arts, 1993.
Photo: Eduard Constantin



Alexandra Pirici, **Persistent Feebleness**, Monument of the Battle of the Nations Leipzig, 2013.



— Sandra Teitge: You have a background in choreography and performing arts and work in what you call an “undisciplined” way, across different mediums. How would you describe your practice?

— Alexandra Pirici: I am not really concerned with what dance in itself produces, and I am not talking about the extended field of choreography but about what is generally understood as “dance” and practiced as such, with the energy of the body

in that way. I am more interested in club culture, conceptually, for that matter. “Undisciplined” is a term I borrowed from Irit Rogoff because it seems like a good way of describing a condition for contemporaneity, in a way. I notice artists still trapped in being informed by only their field of work and for me it became crucial to cross-inform. Not because I would like to produce “interdisciplinary” work but because I think calling yourself a contemporary artist requires a

broader perspective on the present and the context you are working and placing your work in. I would also like to understand, rather than condemn or ignore, the so-called “escapism” of certain areas of cultural production, even if I am to produce something “political” or “socially engaged,” whatever that means. To speak about my practice, at the moment, I would say it is conceptual but concerned with aesthetics, also. I think the political potential of aesthetics is un-



derrated. But as much as I believe in coherence, I try not to work on constructing a brand or a specific type of expectation from my work.

■ Teitge: You often collaborate with other artists, dancers, and designers. For this year's Venice Biennale you worked together with dancer Manuel Pelmus for the Romanian Pavilion's representation, which you titled **An Immaterial Retrospective of the Venice Biennale**. You have also been cooperating with set designer/artist Andrei Dinu on two projects. Do you prefer to work collaboratively?

■ Pirici: I don't prefer to work collaboratively. I work in collaboration but I do a lot of stuff on my own as well. I tend not to favor process over product. I think both are important. No matter how nice the working experience is—as a democratic process, collaboration is always a space of conflict—what you produce also matters a lot in terms of how it manages to displace, disrupt, or circulate something different or to produce a different dynamic. This would be a long discussion.

■ Teitge: How do these collaborations influence your own practice?

■ Pirici: Everything influences my practice and I try to let myself be affected by concepts or ideas coming from different minds, from people I don't collaborate with on something concretely. But of course, I think your environment shapes you and I tend to work with people from whom I feel I can learn.

■ Teitge: Your 2011 project **You Don't Want Us, We Want You** involved different enactments—living sculptures—that confronted public, heroic monuments and buildings in Bucharest, such as the controversial equestrian statue of Carol I; the monument of the 1989 Revolution; or the House of the People. **An Immaterial Retrospective of the Venice Biennale** presents fragments of the whole history of artworks exhibited at the Biennale. It plays with the notion of the monument (the Venice Biennale) and the monumental (a retrospective). Where does this interest in history and monumentality stem from?

■ Pirici: As I said before, I am concerned with the political aspect of aesthetics and so I try to assert conscious decisions in the matter. Monumentality has been the most common tool for representing power throughout the ages, across nations and cultures. Power and authority have always been associated and displayed through size; from pyramids to cathedrals to skyscrapers, you can see this (masculine) obsession with power display and dick measuring and a certain "transcendent" idea of greatness, always represented as

something phallic, of course, going upwards: endless growth. So what I try to do is simply frame situations or confront these constructions and reveal them precisely as constructions. This very simple strategy of placing and framing human bodies in relation to the monumental, this downscaling, is something which is very interesting to me. Most of the works produce some sort of friction, but I try to work without aggression, with playfulness and humor, as I think it might be more effective and critical in a nondidactical way.

■ Teitge: Do you believe that art/performance/dance can inspire a less didactic approach to these large themes within the audience, a different sensibility or awareness maybe?

■ Pirici: To put it very bluntly, I think art should have the capability to move and displace and change. Where and how and on which levels turns into a nightmare conversation—for me it is definitely not about confirming what you already know, asking for no effort, producing no confusion, or asking an audience to clap at the end. It can do that as well, but it really depends. I don't like manipulative art products and obvious, dry statements which seem to insult my intelligence and the complexity of everything. For me, reaching a larger audience does not mean lowering or changing the discourse and the intention so that it becomes more accessible. I think accessibility really has to do with good art or bad art. That's all. And the acknowledgment that you, artist and audience alike, should be available to make an effort, to be open to what you are about to experience or receive as a critique and to have a certain consciousness of humbleness—it's a negotiation. Then maybe we can be affected and moved or have our perspective on things broadened; maybe we can be open to the possibility of surprise or transformation, for the better.

■ Teitge: Your project for the Romanian Pavilion reveals the Biennale's Eurocentrism. It equally hints at the profit-oriented mechanisms of the art world, including shipping, insurance, and storage costs. By having performers in lieu of objects on display, it avoids most of these costs and instead invests its budget in the labor of human bodies which were "imported" to Venice to perform in the Romanian Pavilion. The city of Venice depends on a large immigrant workforce, predominantly Romanians, Moldavians, and Albanians—people who came to Italy for economic reasons but predominantly live in precarity. How important is this sociopolitical element, for you, in your work?

■ Pirici: I would say that the **Immaterial Retrospective** also acknowledges the openness and diversity of the Biennale as much as it criticizes it. Besides artworks, we also staged events or situations related to the Biennale—you can see it also had a history of protest and contestation. The 1974 Biennale, for instance, was completely dedicated to Chile as a major cultural protest against Pinochet's dictatorship. The sociopolitical element is important in my work, but just as important as the artistic element. I cannot separate them. I think the artistic is what has the capability to affect and dislocate; it's the way in which you make and deliver things, rather than solely the ideological statement. I am also not interested in political work that becomes mere propaganda and serves a specific political purpose. I do understand the necessity for creativity placed in the service of specific political goals in specific situations and I endorse the approach, but for me the political, in general, is plural and conflictual, so there is a certain ambiguity that comes with it. Giving space to move, think, interpret, and produce meaning is what I find more interesting than telling people what to do, or how to think or feel, so I really try to avoid didacticism. I think Baudrillard's observation—that in post-industrialism power is exercised through control over the means of representation, rather than the means of production—is something which opens up different and more relevant critical possibilities.

As for the performers becoming reflections of the immigrant workers, yes, we were aware of the condition of the "precarious worker." But we are all precarious workers, sometimes even paid worse than other immigrant workers, or sometimes we are simply unpaid. For the Biennale, we tried to do our best with the budget we had and over 90% of it was used to pay and accommodate the performers.

■ Teitge: Was this an important element of the project from its inception?

■ Pirici: If you refer to the sociopolitical element, yes, it was. But not in the direction of addressing working relations. I am aware that this is a popular and necessary discourse at the moment, but I also think it can tend to become very reductionist. Somebody told us at some point that the effort the performers make is amazing, that they work four hours a day. Of course it is a huge effort performing and keeping focused for that long, being cold or hot in the pavilion. But the idea that work as such should not be visible in the artworld, as if the artworld is a safe haven disconnected from the real world, I don't



agree with. As Santiago Sierra once pointed out (if I'm not misquoting), talking about one of his works which implied live presence in the gallery being criticized as somehow abusive, "look at the museum guards who work next to the oeuvres." I think there is a sort of schizophrenia when it comes to the perception of labor. In other words, what seems natural in a "real life" context (working 8 hours a day) might seem totally un-natural when exposed in an art context. Visual artists often employ a whole factory for the objects they make, and just because sometimes you can't see the work behind the object, it really doesn't mean it does not exist. In that sense we were not interested in covering up the "work" or the "employment." The critical and political aspect of the Venice project mostly relied on the placement of the work in that context—a retrospective of the whole Venice Biennale (an obviously impossible task) performed by the Romanian Pavilion—a "peripheral" country that claims its own right to write history and to downscale the monumentality of the institution of the Biennale and of the object/art-work/artist-brand.

■ Teitge: Do you get your ideas when in situ? Or do you come to places or situations with an idea already in your mind?

■ Pirici: For Venice, Manuel and I both considered the context; we both work in a context-related way. I don't like to export work, and I can't really export work, since most of the work I now produce is made in situ. An interesting subject would be the economy of this type of work. This doesn't mean that I don't follow or try to develop a certain interest. I might have an idea in mind, but the form can totally change depending on the context.

■ Teitge: To take an example, how did the process in Leipzig evolve? There, at the famous Völkerschlachtdenkmal (the Monument to the Battle of the Nations), you and the dancers conversed with the four German virtues—bravery, willingness to sacrifice, strength of the people, and strength of faith. Could you say a little bit about how this project developed?

■ Pirici: Joanna Warsza invited me present a project in the framework of an exhibition she was curating around the notion of "performative democracy" at the Museum for Contemporary Art, Leipzig. So again, it was a context-related work and it was in the public (I would call it public) space—the interior of the Battle of the Nations Monument in Leipzig. I worked with performers and not dancers. Some

of them had had some dance training but they were doing different things and would actually define themselves as artists—some were visual art students. I make this distinction because I find it important. I don't work only with dancers. The Biennale project also had different performers with different bodies, different presences, and different skills. This is part of an aesthetic choice. We didn't like the uniform dancer body and the mannerist movement that comes with specific dance training most of the time. In the end of course you make choices within this field as well—there is a level of "sloppiness" that you can allow that cannot go beyond a point where it would then become a parody, since the intention was not parodic.

The choice to work at the Battle of Nations monument was somehow obvious. It was, again, really big, and it was also the most controversial site in Leipzig. It also had a centennial anniversary this year, commemorating the battle which actually took place 200 years ago—Napoleon's defeat by the Prussian army and the so-called birth of the true German nation. Officials have now turned it into a celebration for change, for European Union values and friendship and so on. In the end our idea was not to attack but rather to question the meaning attached to a monument with such strong nationalistic signs, symbols, and history. The monument has been appropriated in different historical moments by different political interests and ideologies, mostly by the extreme right. The statues of the four German virtues seemed very interesting to relate to. Again, size was important, they are huge and even though they are only about 100 years old, they are sculpted in a somewhat Egyptian style, like colossuses, precisely to fake some sort of national mythology and to better impose that on the viewer. So what I proposed was placing one human performer on each sculpture in certain positions or performing certain actions related to the initial significance of the statue, to confront the size but also to hijack or detour its significance and to "kill the aura," as a slightly outraged visitor said. It was also a performance of weak action against such a strong background—we spoke a lot about a positive weakness, which can become a source of strength when persistent (the project is called **Persistent Feebleness**). It was interesting to notice that for some people the mere presence of humans on the statues was a sign of disrespect and "desacralization," even though they were not perform-

ing anything disrespectful. So I think the strategy can be very helpful in revealing the constructed nature of these "sacred" places and the effect intended on the viewer.

■ Teitge: Can you describe what triggers your interest in a place or situation? What makes a place "worth a performance" in your view?

■ Pirici: In site-specific work, if you're looking for trouble, of course it can be easier when the space is already conflictual or has some sort of controversial history that you can relate to and that can give you something to start from. But I don't think there is a rule. I am now working on a public project for an exhibition in this beautiful town in Switzerland next year, which I find very different, and a little harder, because of the apparently nonconflictual context. But there are always things you can try out and dynamics that can be revealed by addressing less concrete issues in more poetic ways, ways which can still be politically relevant.

