

... and the winner is...

Truths/s - project by Liliana Basarab, Dayton, Ohio, U.S.A, 2011

Review by Mihaela Varzari

For the past decade, the artist Liliana Basarab often investigates such universal concepts like truth or beauty, as seen by the invited participants, in order to question certain value systems informed by the current society. It is certain that every age systematically reconstructs its own value system. Through her subtlety often-light humorous sculptures, performances or videos she launches an investigation into our values-based consumer society.

In her new work called *Truth/s*, produced as a result of a two-month residency financed by CEC Artslink New York - Independent Grants and Ohio Art Council hosted by Dayton Visual Art Centre. the collaborative nature of this project is paramount as each participant intentionally contributes with her/his own texture to the work. The final show comprised of a 4 min video piece showing three dancers dressed in simple blue jeans and either black or white t-shirts performing, accompanied by some kind of heavy metal soundtrack, in a rehearsal studio.

Liliana Basarab's works are *performances* which engage often fellow artists, lay audience, school children or dancers and choreographers, like in her latest project, who collude with her and become 'co-authors' of the final result. There is as much emphasis on the journey as on the destination, and the risks and chances inherent in Basarab's collaborations ultimately give surprising shape to the final works, whether these are videos, costumes, sculptures or post cards.

The idea behind this project is the popular game *Charades*, whereby one has to guess as soon as possible the word mimed by somebody else. On this occasion, the artist chose three young female dancers to mime the word *truth*.

The three videos were posted on line on a website, specially designed for the project, where members of the community can vote the dancer who best represented the word truth. Once the voting was finished and a winner was announced, a choreographer was asked to take the project further according to his vision. He chose to work with all three dancers instead of just one, the winner, and he re-interpreted their contributions into one dance piece. His version the audio was the song Truth by Alexander but for the final video the artist added a different soundtrack by local bands from Dayton. *Truth/s* is evolving therefore like a work in progress, through a gradual collection of subjective accounts of the members of the public, the dancers and the choreographer, all of them contributing with their own interpretation of the word *truth*. By constantly recycling symbols, Basarab's practice has been revolving around deconstructing certain social morals and also questioning with her characteristic humor and grace the current social structure based on such grand notions like truth.

Originally influenced by the artistic group from Iasi, Romania, galvanized around Vector Association at the beginning of 2000, she gradually detached herself from it, taking on

an increasingly personalized view on unfolding the innumerable shields of the individual as a social construct.

1989 represented for many of the European ex-communist countries a quick change of value system. The lessons learnt were no longer valid and an abrupt modification in ways of perceiving reality started to lay its eggs. The constant state of schizophrenia imposed by the state apparatus was gone and individuals found themselves free and too eager to embrace the values of a more advanced society based on individualism as opposed to collective performance. Basarab positions herself as the alienated outsider trying to peek through the values constructing our guiding principles. *Realization is number one!* says a famous hip-hop song.

In her previous projects, at the end of each of her staying in three different countries (Romania, Germany and U.S.) Basarab realized a series of public sculptures, titled *monuments for concepts*. The participants were asked to pose for an online gallery and the general public was then invited to vote the person who represents the concept of normality, acceptability etc at its best. In the process, her seemingly harmless yet inevitably subversive gestures touch at the very core of how politics, culture and society quietly function. By involving the participants to actively vote according to common concepts, which enable us to tick a certain box next to a certain person, Basarab exposing our fragile value system playing with our projections and operational systems of beliefs. The artist's interest lies in her ability to scrutinize different societies by using the same detecting system. By doing so, she manages to successfully inquire into cultural differences... but what differences since our current needs tend to be satisfied in shockingly similar ways. In a society undergoing transformation imbued by a rapid economical growth dictated by personal profit, what are the incentives for a personalized value system supported by individualism?

The uncertainties surrounding the realization of an exhibition were not hidden, as Basarab explains. On the last occasion in 2010, such a sculpture was supposed to be erected but the ceramic based object once out the kiln broke into several pieces and instead the broken sculpture was showed at the opening. Trained in an antiquated, academic manner at the Arts University from Iasi, the teachings of perfecting yourself as an artist by realizing a perfect copy is no foreign to her. Like the artist Stefan Constantinescu's newly exhibited paintings realized after communist propaganda photographs, Liliana Basarab is making use of her apprentice years as an artist, in a conceptual way.

In one respect, these sculptures therefore appear to bring forth, figures of the community equals to themselves, susceptible to being assigned to one common criteria. It simultaneously carries with it, the syndrome of democracy and the illusion of power. A line from the American film *To Die For* by Gus Van Sant (1995, U.S.) springs to my mind. A minor character, (Lydia Mertz played by Alison Folland) after being used and abandoned by Miss Stone, a local very ambitious TV presenter, played by Nicole Kidman, who tricked her into helping her organizing her husband's death, said: *Miss Stone used to say that* “:

You are not really anybody in America unless you are on TV. Cos' what the point of doing anything worthwhile if there is nobody is watching? So when people are watching it makes you a better person. So, if everybody was on TV all the time, everybody will be better people. But if everybody was on TV all the time, there wouldn't be anyone left to watch. This is where I get confused."

It is certain that every age systematically reconstructs its own value system. And indeed is age, which differentiates the possible changes and not location anymore. In a society promoting individualism but not an individual belief system, no wonder our aspirations and dreams will turn out to be the same.

Her sculptures trigger the collective perspective as well as the individual account on values we operate with on a daily basis. Monuments taken into the public are always political in their essence. In their artistic practice they analyze the relation to the tradition of artistic production, in which traditional sculpture and monument play a central role.

Working with time and many times against time, Basarab's projects are the outcome of a very intricate process based on a constant negotiation to the point where the art works are some clusters of multiple meanings. Arm yourself with wit, grace and humor and engage in the multifarious works of Liliana Basarab.

www.lilianabasarab.com/truths

design by Costel Chirila

Dancers: Alexandra White, Jesseca Smalt, Madalyn White. Choreographer: Rodney Veal
Soundtrack: Filthy American Swine, Strawberry Thundercunt, The Score (Dayton, Ohio, USA)