

Decamouflaging

You like potato and I like *potahto*
You like tomato and I like *tomahto*
Potato, *potahto*, tomato, *tomahto*!
Let's call the whole thing off!

When George and Ira Gershwin wrote this song for the 1937 film *Shall We Dance*, they created a camouflaging device of sorts. The most famous exchange in the song, "You like tomato/And I like to-mah-to", humorously compares the accents of British and American English. But the contest of cross-Atlantic diction works as a 'disguise'; it conceals something of perhaps greater importance. The nuances of pronunciation, the reverberation of certain sounds, particularly the annunciation of the letter 'a', have much more to do with the differentiation of class. At the time of the Gershwins' work, and for a nouveau American upper-class, the American *potato* was typically considered less refined than the English *potahto*. This U.S. set took great pains to pronounce English words more eloquently than the English by way of a Mid-Atlantic conceit. George and Ira were Russian Jews, living in Brooklyn, writing this song from the perspective of immigrants. They were vigilant observers of contemporary American society, unafraid to lampoon social mores and reveal social subtexts.

The layers and patterns of the Gershwin case resonate with the artworks presented in this online show, and reveal something about the position of our artist. Alicja Rogalska is Polish, living in London, producing art from the perspective of an immigrant. She is an attentive observer of contemporary society, courageously opening one or two of Pandora's most complex boxes. The videos Rogalska presents here for the Art Exchange exhibition 'Other Voices' - with their songs, their performances, their participatory acts - are using a disambiguation strategy to lay bare some of the patterns and subtexts of contemporary times. Continuing my reference to camouflage, the artistic tactic of the videos is more *mimetic* than *cryptic*. Camouflaging can entail using a combination of materials or illumination to make something hard to see (crypsis) or can make an object look like something else which is of no special interest to the observer (mimesis).

The videos might show us groups of people singing together, busking, making clay potatoes, making their costumes, or having a chat, meanwhile the content of the lyrics, the storytelling as well as the conversations, are revealing urgent issues about class, migration, labour and power.

The revelatory role played by the potatoes in the Gershwins' song, and again in Rogalska's video 'The Royals', can be illuminated with reference to the mushrooms in Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's book 'The Mushroom at the End of the World': vegetable as metaphor for illuminating contemporary issues of import. This adds to the sophistication of the mimetic technique in use. In order to promulgate through the channels of the art world deeper more complex information about the working conditions of Polish "tattie howkers" in Jersey, Rogalska concentrates on the potatoes. Those who generally pick them, who know them inside out, who give so much for so little to extract them from the ground, are sitting together in a workshop, *making* potatoes with clay. Each potato is unique and studied in remarkable detail. Typical of Rogalska's artistry, a component of the situation under creative scrutiny is employed in a novel way to dig into the various problematics and social injustices of these workers. It is not a generalised case of labour or migration or integration: it is the assemblage of very specific stories and their complexities, metaphorised by the specificities of each potato made by each individual's own agency. Powerfully, Rogalska as artist, and Tsing as scholar, are unearthing common patterns of complex lives in capitalist ruins.

By doing so, Rogalska's works enhance our understanding of current societal issues. The artist is aware that a common and pernicious strategy to maintain the neoliberal system is *generalisation*: mainstream narratives unable by design to explain the peculiarities and realities of the singular cases presented in the world. In as much, Rogalska's revelations come about by being attuned and receptive to what Tsing calls 'contaminated diversity'.

[...] contaminated diversity is complicated, often ugly, and humbling. Contaminated diversity implicates survivors in histories of greed, violence, and environmental destruction. The tangled landscape grown up from corporate logging reminds us of the irreplaceable graceful giants that came before. [...] Worse yet, contaminated diversity is recalcitrant to the kind of "summing up" that has become the hallmark of modern knowledge. Contaminated diversity is not only particular and

historical, ever changing, but also relational. [...] Scholars and policymakers might have to learn something about the cultural and natural histories at stake. That takes time, and too much time, perhaps, for those who dream of grasping the whole in an equation. But who put them in charge? If a rush of troubled stories is the best way to tell about contaminated diversity, then it's time to make that rush part of our knowledge practices. (Tsing: 2015)

Rogalska looks for *troubled stories at the end of the world*, and makes them visible. One such troubled story within 'The Royals' (2014) can be classed as an example of biopolitical racism, following the work of curator and critic Marina Gržinič. For Gržinič, biopolitical racism is 'an essential component of the neoliberal nation-state that authorizes the prevention of equal rights, controlling and marginalizing those that are non-constitutive of the "white in blood and soil" nation-state majority'. (Gržinič: 2017.)

The potato labourers are rudely generalised as 'inferior' migrants, or more precisely, according to Gržinič, 'legal migrant residents but not citizens - marginalized along the racial axis (to which is added a religious axis measured in terms of deviation from the Catholic/Christian traditions)'. (Gržinič: 2017.)

In 'Aliens Act' (2019) six stories about *erasure* of human beings are made visible. Erasure being an extreme act of identity nullification at the service of dangerously simplistic nation-state generalisations. Rogalska transforms these individual *troubled stories* through collective, restorative exercise: a communal effort to heal the trauma of identity and citizenship loss by creating 'national' costumes to represent them as individuals in all their resilience. This video tells us about a historical event that took place in 1991, when Slovenia seceded from Yugoslavia. Due to this geopolitical change thousands of people had their existing rights arbitrarily withdrawn and many were forced to leave the country altogether. The case was taken to court and only then the act of erasure was declared unconstitutional.

Rogalska's way of amplifying these stories is quite eclectic: in 'Aliens Act' the protagonists have in common a nationality and use some 'disguise making' to decamouflage and re-appropriate their identity. In 'My Friend's Job' (2017) the protagonists are buskers whose visual identity is somehow obfuscated. The buskers' faces are covered with some mirrored cubical surfaces. Their identities are not revealed to us, but their realities (their audiences, their surroundings) become the visual protagonists of the video. Contrary to the 'Aliens Act', this

story is contemporary, therefore the device used, the mirror-mask, gives us an immediate connection with the now. The mirror, such a loaded instrument in the history of art, is working at the same time as *specchio della realta* (mirror of *reality* - a sign of the times) and as mirror of the *soul*. The mirrors take us as viewers to the Indonesian public space, and give us a sense of being in the street, vulnerable, exposed. Of course, the mirrors *return* the viewers in the video *to* the street, laying bare the surrounding conditions and positions of the locals' viewpoints. The mirrors also protect by concealment the identities of the musicians who joined Rogalska in the distribution of this musical political manifesto.

And the lyrics of the song constitute a declaration to the local Government. Written by the buskers, the lyrics have two main audiences: those ruling the public space (and not supportive of the idea of buskers) and a broader audience, those potentially unaware of the buskers' working conditions. By way of the reflections in the mirrors, the buskers are joined in their claim for better working conditions by accidental comrades - transport staff, street cleaners, hospitality workers. As with 'The Royals', Rogalska reflects and demystifies the realities of working conditions of those often overlooked.

'Tears Dealer' (2014) takes us further into the conditions and contexts of stories at the end of the world: this time a forceful dramatisation of the commercialisation of emotions. Rogalska created a temporary business where people could sell their tears for €25 per 3ml. On this occasion, Rogalska was not reporting on a specific demographic, a specific case within the neoliberal system, but revealing a dark, and widespread commercial logic. Although a temporary fictional situation, the 'dealership' also showed, quite brutally, what people are willing to do for money. How might all of this be seen through the lens of poverty pornography, as defined by T.J.Demos? This term describes the worst of the images that exploit the poor for little more than voyeuristic ends and where people are portrayed as helpless, passive objects. And here the pornographic view is practised by the so-called impoverished agent, a layered investigation by Rogalska into issues of complicity and coercion.

In her work, the artist is interested in revealing to us that fiction might be seen to be central to, of all things, the law more than we might imagine. Rogalska's video, 'What If As If'(2017) introduces us to the faces, bodies and gestures of refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants based in the UK who trained as

lawyers in their countries of origin. In an interesting way, the real protagonist of this video *is* the law. The artist invites us to reconsider our thoughts about and perceptions of law: what it represents for us, how it functions, and how we erroneously perceive its connection with justice, fairness, and common good. The video is a record of a brainstorming session between experts in the sector about the concept of legal fiction.

Mateusz Stępień, Associate Professor in Sociology of Law at Jagiellonian University, writing in the reader that accompanied the exhibition, 'Dreams & Dramas: the body, community, territory, and property' 2017 (for which Rogalska presented 'What If As If') calls these tactics of fiction, 'hiyal'. This is an Arabic term meaning devices or subterfuges, a definition created by the Hanafi school, one of the four major Sunni Islamic schools of jurisprudence and methodology. Stępień explains:

The judge is called upon to accept something that is contrary to the obvious values protected by law, as long as it conforms to the letter of the law. For example, one rule of ownership states that when a farmer sells a parcel of land, his neighbor has a right to first refusal on a contiguous plot. The obvious value protected by this rule is the unification of the many tiny plots that ensue from the specific Islamic inheritance rules. But the rule of first refusal does not apply to donations. So, a farmer who donates a narrow strip along the border of his land to someone else frees himself of the restraints imposed by the first refusal rule and can then sell the rest of the land to anyone. Jurists have created such constructs to protect the freedom of contracts and to minimize some restrictive but widely accepted Islamic ownership rules. In this case, legal fictions, hiyal, are a type of legal scaffolding: tools intended to make the law more flexible by using it in a more formal way (and which have come about due to the complexity of law).

(Stępień: 2017)

If we return for a moment to where we started, we see a Russian doll: the Gershwin brothers used the device of the accent to talk about class, Rogalska is using the devices of labour and migration to talk about biopolitics and citizenship, and the jurists are creating devices able to 'put to an extra-legal end that could not be attained by compliance with both the letter of the law and the intention behind it.' (Stępień: 2017.)

In Rogalska's videos our eyes are exposed to moving images that illustrate for us a multiplicity of art forms. The artist uses music, folklore, crafts, sculpture, public art, performance, and more, to convey her message through complex narratives. Those narratives and troubled stories emerge thanks to Rogalska's impeccable use of participatory action research. Her entire body of work is based on careful and situated research, conducted with stakeholders, academic and industry experts, wider society and members of the communities Rogalska embeds herself within. She connects with a specific location or issue, digging deep to surface and highlight vital issues. Like any respectful researcher, Alicja, does not leave aside her positionality. Her artistic identity, perceived as neither a British artist in England nor any longer a Polish artist in Poland, is part of this positional mosaic.

Confident with the subject matter, Rogalska remixes with great skill the decamouflaged components that arise from her artistic research, transforming them into poetic overlays that reveal much about the chosen diverse and troubled stories that lie underneath.

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