

On the Impossibility and Inevitability of Representation

by Lina Džuverović

I am a curator and am fully involved in the field of contemporary art, not politics, but my interest in questions of representation and artistic autonomy stems from a need to question the framing of artistic works – the context in which they appear, which I think is central to the role of both curator and artist. So during my talk I would like us to think about the questions of autonomy – or to put into question the very possibility of artistic autonomy – as we think of the relationship between ideology and art.

I want to start by looking at the term 'soft power' as one of the tools in the nation-building apparatus of the state, and to try to juxtapose this against possible positions of artists.

What is 'soft power'? [SLIDE]

"Soft power is a way of achieving goals by getting others to do what you want through fostering shared values, as opposed to hard power, which uses coercion or military force."

The term soft power, a staple of international affairs and in the language of analysts and states people, has been around for some time, and yet it remains rarely discussed outside of the context of foreign policy. It is used in global business, banking, trade, but it is not often used in culture. Coined in 1990 by the US foreign policy expert Joseph Nye, the term is defined as:

"the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideas, and policies. [...] When you can get others to admire your ideals and to want what you want, you do not have to spend as much on sticks and carrots to move them in your direction. Seduction is always more effective than coercion."¹

[SLIDE - of Institute of Government, Monocle]

Since 2010, the Institute for Government² and Monocle, the global affairs and lifestyle magazine, founded by the globetrotting style icon Tyler Brûlé of *Wallpaper Magazine* fame, have been publishing a Soft Power Index. [SLIDE - of Tyler Brûlé, Monocle, Wallpaper]

The reason for showing images of the magazine itself and Tyler Brûlé is to just point to the visual representation and precision in the way these ideas are communicated – this is not data for data's sake, this is the 'Soft Power Index' which in itself embodies soft power.

As an aside – Monocle is the sister company of the branding agency Winkreative who regularly offer branding services to governments [SLIDES - of country branding] such as most recently Thailand and the Taiwan Tourism Bureau, and therefore well versed in the visual language of national branding. (There is interesting research into the shift in nation-branding from political to post-political – i.e. moving away from strongly political symbols such as flags towards more 'ambiguous' symbolism not so closely associated with the nation state – which would be good to explore on some other occasion).

I bring these images up as a visual aid as I would like us to be aware of the mechanisms behind this kind of branding and representational work, and I would like us to think about who they are aimed at, who is shaping the messages and how they are visually represented. This information is not aimed at the general public

(although everything in this presentation is publicly available) but at opinion formers. The target markets for this research are policy makers, not so much those working in culture, 'on the ground'. I am interested in the visual language here – the associations between style and branding of a nation.

So the 'Soft Power Index' [SLIDE - of cover of SPI] charts which nations are making the most of their cultural and business assets. It is drawn up following a complex analysis of [SLIDE - of main areas] five indices, broadly divided into culture, diplomacy, education, business/innovation, and government.

Within the 'Culture sub index' [SLIDE] the study looks at film festival success, gallery attendance, number of World Heritage sites, status of international football, Olympic profile, music market, record label sales, etc.

It is only in the past few years, perhaps in part due to Monocle's user-friendly and well-publicised Soft Power Index which makes it easier to 'digest', that the term has become widely known and frequently discussed in the media, perhaps, at times, without a genuine understanding of its meaning. These days, broadsheets like the UK conservative newspaper *The Daily Mail* are quick to cash in on Britain's status in the soft power survey (Britain is repeatedly at the top of the Soft Power Index, alongside Germany and France), proudly listing British cultural exports such as the new James Bond film, the successful hosting of the Olympics/Paralympics, and the Diamond Jubilee, as proof of Britain's alleged superiority.

Instrumentalising the survey to suit its own agenda, *The Daily Mail* enthusiastically exclaimed that: "The sun may have set on the British Empire, but this country is once again the globe's most powerful nation by at least one yardstick."³

Soft power, then, is essentially a measure of how 'likeable' a country is, how able it is to represent itself in the most favourable light by capitalising on its positive points, and is something to which governments across the globe are paying increasing attention. It is less about a country's actual number and quality of assets and more about its ability to recognise, nurture, and benefit from (and market) its potential. Said to be not unlike "sex appeal on a national scale"⁴, it has little to do with 'natural beauty' and more to do with the ability to flaunt whatever one has, in the most marketable way, capitalising on what one has to work with. As it happens, soft power, according to Monocle, is easier to lose than to obtain in the first place. Sometimes a freak incident – mad cow disease, a mass murder, or a traffic disaster – can send a country's image abroad spiralling downwards. Of course the Sochi Olympics is a perfect case study in a country's negotiations of its soft power.

Thinking about culture from the perspective of the Soft Power Index – as one of many pieces of the jigsaw puzzle used to create a particular image – I would like us to think about the relationship between cultural production on the ground and top-down national representation. Or in broader terms, how these questions come down to the problem of representation and autonomy. Does art have any possibility of autonomy, of agency, to transcend this discourse and transform real social relations? What plausible ways might there be for artists to negotiate the issue of representation and to strive towards some forms of autonomy. Or is it just doomed and is an artist just a small player fitting into the bigger picture?

We know that the relationship between ideology and the possibility of autonomy has been theorised extensively, from the perspective that art is a way of seeing – it allows us to perceive the ideology from

which it is born (Althusser), to Bourdieu's idea of the cultural field in which positions shift but the field itself remains the same, and Foucault's approach that power is everywhere, diffused and embodied in discourse.

In Barthes-ian terms, if myth is depoliticised speech, then the very task of national representation and soft power is to mythologise – and market – the cultural and social life of a country, depoliticising it in the process by removing its social context and history, and only presenting the myth of its image. [SLIDE - of Blair, Cameron]

(Some very crass and obvious examples of such practices might be Brit Pop, Cool Britannia, French cuisine or Scandinavian furniture).

If the mythic level of the sign becomes a way of concealing the country's actual nature (a deeply problematic concept in itself) by presenting itself as truth, then soft power is the ultimate mythmaking tool.

From the point of view of the cultural worker – artist, musician, curator, playwright – soft power is the unmentionable. It is a dirty word, synonymous with instrumentalising culture for other, perhaps, at times, sinister, political goals. For discerning artists, curators, or producers – to embrace this terminology would mean to actively take part in the creation of a myth, to be complicit with a system of which they may be highly critical, and from which they may wish to remain independent, regardless of which nation they belong to.

Agencies of soft power like the Alliance Française, British Council, and Goethe Institut are the acceptable buffers of cultural diplomacy, mediating between governance and practice 'on the ground', to the broad acceptance of all parties.

But a direct head-on acceptance or declaration that a cultural work is actively contributing to the fostering of a certain national image, is something rarely embraced by the individual artist. Of course, at the same time, the artist is usually fully aware that soft power is 'the name of the game' and that, in cultural work of any kind, this is the language we speak in every funding application, in every sponsorship deal to which we agree and, above all, with every opportunity to appear at a national level in any form of a representational role.

We are aware that by signing on the dotted line we are agreeing that our art, our theatre productions, or our texts broadly add to, enhance, and illustrate the strategic vision of our funder, sponsor, or nation. Through our work, we become complicit in the construction of the mythology of a nation and its cultural policy. Like actors performing to a script, we become part of a narrative, one of many parts of the puzzle that commodifies the cultural life of a nation.

What can an artist do? Is there a possibility of autonomy? For many artists the very notion of representation is central to the work.

For instance, in her recent work entitled 'Why an Artist Cannot Represent a Nation State' [SLIDE - of performance image] staged at the Musée d'Art Contemporain in Val-de-Marne, France (2012) and subsequently in Zagreb, Croatia, the Croatian artist Sanja Iveković, in collaboration with philosopher and long time collaborator Rada Iveković, presented a performance dealing with the impossibility of national representation. The work was prompted precisely by the fact that Iveković was invited to exhibit during the

Year of Croatia in France, in the context of a national festival entitled 'Croatie, la voici'. It would be hard to find an artist whose work is less likely to serve an ambassadorial purpose, as Iveković is the kind of artist who stands for the marginalised, dispossessed, often highlighting the very social problems that cultural diplomacy tends to gloss over in favour of happier, more glamorous imagery. For Iveković, the only way to participate in Croatia, la voici was to challenge and highlight the absurdity of the situation. At one point during the performance, we hear Rada Iveković exclaim: [SLIDE - of Rada Ivekovic text]

"Representation is an eternal puzzle of politics as well as of art. It is in both cases at once impossible yet attempted again and again; impracticable but necessary. You better be represented in some way than poorly represented, and the worst is not to be represented at all. Art and politics revolve around these two poles – the impossibility and yet the inevitability of representation."⁵ [SLIDE - of text]

There is no better embodiment of the "impossibility and inevitability of representation" than the internationally revered Venice Biennale. The complexity of such an arena comes to the fore through the inherent contradiction between national representation and the exhibiting artists' resistance to representing anything or anybody but themselves. Anxious but complicit, critical but excited, the art world and its protagonists continue to embrace, use, and abuse this diplomatic extravaganza, feeding off the co-dependent relationship between national interest and content providers. For an individual to accept, even momentarily, any form of national identification, and furthermore, representation, would mean to accept that there is an absolute, solid, grounded essence of belonging, to accept that everything outside of that is other – and therein lies the problem. [SLIDES - of Venice Biennale, Fia Backstrom]

What I am showing you here are images of the work 'Borderless Bastards' by Fia Backstrom, a Swedish artist who alongside Andreas Eriksson, another Swedish artist, was a representative of Sweden in the Nordic Pavilion at the Venice Biennial in 2011. In 'Borderless Bastards', Backstrom asked cultural workers from different countries represented in Venice to choose "a public sculpture of a common person from the time when your nation-state was created." She then created aluminium cut-outs bearing digital reproductions of those sculptures, placing these knockoffs near the pavilions of their countries of origin. The cut-outs were associated with an audio file of the interviews with cultural workers, discussing national symbolism and explaining the narratives around the images they chose, expressing personal opinions, doubts and incongruities. The work, a sound walk, thus formed an invisible alternative map which challenged national stereotypes and narratives, physically positioned on the margins of those countries' representational territories (the pavilions).

I want to end by bringing up Slavoj Žižek's term 'overidentification' which he borrows from Lacan but applies to politics rather than psychoanalysis, and to look at some practices that could be seen to use overidentification as a strategy. Žižek defines the term overidentification as the idea of taking the system more seriously than it takes itself – so far as to reveal its "hidden reverse". Overidentification seems to belong somewhere on the spectrum of parody, satire, sarcasm, irony and pastiche, but unlike these other distancing mechanisms deliberately obscures any clear lines between two systems of knowledge.

In a way overidentification is the opposite of 'soft power' as it works with penetrating the apparatus of the system to such an extent that it begins to reveal paradoxes within the system to reveal its flaws – or Žižek's

term "the hidden reverse". Overidentification finds logical paradoxes within the system, rather than imposing an external logic or ethic upon it to reveal its flaws and in that sense it is able to go beyond irony.

Zizek first used this term to describe Neue Slowenische Kunst, a multidisciplinary cultural-political intervention which emerged in Yugoslavia in 1983, and which comprised a number of collectives (the band Laibach, visual arts wing IRWIN, design New Collectivism, theatre Scipion Nasice and Department Of Pure and Applied Philosophy.) [SLIDES - of Laibach, Petar Mlakar, Irwin]

Initially the most visible and best known (and most disconcerting) component of NSK was Laibach, who incorporated elements of official Yugoslav discourse on self-management and social democracy, using at times sections of Tito's speeches and audio recordings, as well as images and phrases of the anti-fascist partisans, but combining them with elements of totalitarian regimes as well as Slovenian local symbolism. Their use of German in all their communication and choice of the name Laibach, which is the Germanic name for Ljubljana, was in itself highly problematic. It is this reworking of Slovenian and Yugoslav history that invested their early works with such potency, through the way these familiar ideas were made strange and even uncomfortable to audiences.

For example, NSK were behind a well-known scandal which took place in 1987, seven years after the death of Tito, the Yugoslav statesman serving from 1943 until his death in 1980. The controversy broke out when a group of young punk-influenced Slovenian artists, known as Neue Slowenische Kunst, won the competition for a poster design to celebrate the 25th of May (The Day of Yugoslav Youth) and the birthday of Josip Broz Tito. NSK's proposal for the birth anniversary of the dead president was a poster representing a strong athletic looking young man, with a victorious stance, holding objects symbolising, power, success, looking to the future. [SLIDE - of poster] The poster was chosen by the generals of the Yugoslav People's Army and top-ranking Yugoslav politicians as the best design to represent this Yugoslav state celebration.

The poster, designed by the NSK design branch 'New Collectivism', was reproduced in Politika, the main Yugoslav daily newspaper where an astute member of the public spotted the striking similarity to Nazi artist Richard Klein's poster used in the Third Reich. The press and authorities were informed and an indictment was brought against the group, but was soon dropped. This incident demonstrated the universality of the visual symbols representing power, success, youth – symbols used by all ideology, and easily reconfigured to suit particular political agendas.

In all of their outputs Neue Slowenische Kunst embraced and internalised symbolism of the Yugoslav state apparatus, fusing together elements from varying and completely incongruent political philosophies and collapsing the aesthetics of totalitarian and nationalist movements, art history (in particular Kazimir Malevich) forging a form of totalitarian kitsch. Overidentification is useful as an intervention as it adopts a set of ideas, images, or politics, putting them into question not by a direct, open or straightforward critique, but rather through and grotesquely exaggerated adoption of them. [SLIDE - NSK State in Time]

Some branches of NSK went on, in 1992, to form NSK State, or the first global 'State in Time', taking their strategies further to create a nation state with no territory, existing conceptually, in time. The NSK state today has many thousands of members from Japan to Nigeria, who are proud holders of the NSK Passport. [SLIDE - image of passport] The NSK state has an active website, regular video news bulletins and a

newspaper, regular congresses as well as many NSK artists who make artworks and craft objects inspired by the NSK state. It is also the subject of a book by Alexei Monroe, one of its most enthusiastic members, translated into several languages, as well as being regularly discussed at academic conferences on a range of subjects.

To conclude I want to just mention two interesting projects (as it happens both from Slovenia) who could be said to use similar strategies. [SLIDE - of Jansas]

'My Name Is Janez Janša' is an ongoing project in which three artists from Slovenia changed their name to Janez Jansa – the name of the former Slovenian Prime Minister (2004 to 2008, and again from 2012 to 2013) during the time that he was in power. Their action was undertaken in response to a letter they received when joining Jansa's party, which stated 'the more of us there are, the faster we will achieve our goals'. Taking this literally, the three artists changed their names to Janez Jansa.

Another, more recent project taking a different line in overidentifying with the nation state is by the artist Jasmina Cibic, who represented Slovenia at the 2013 Venice Biennial. Cibic often collaborates with various mechanisms of state apparatus in the creation her works. [SLIDES - of 'I Feel Love']

On 11th and 12th of July 2007, as part of the Tourists Welcome project, the State Police Orchestra of the Republic of Slovenia performed live in the new terminal building of Brnik Airport. The orchestra used the same performance protocols that they use when playing for visiting foreign dignitaries, standing in formation and co-ordinating their movements under the instruction of a conductor. Instead of the usual repertoire of national songs, the orchestra played Giorgio Moroder's I Feel Love, disco music that was originally written for Donna Summer in 1977. Cibic commissioned a new seven-minute orchestral arrangement of the song specially for this performance. The choice of I Feel Love directly referenced the recently chosen Slovene national, economic and tourist slogan: "I Feel (S)love(nia)".

Most recently, at the Venice Biennial, Cibic's Slovenian Pavilion, entitled 'For Our Economy and Culture' was a series of interventions which dealt with "not only the power paradigms inherent in systems of authority, but also the explicit contradictions present in the transmutation of a national identity from past to present, place to place".

Cibic essentially worked with numerous layers and forms of national representation starting from the architectural specificity of the Slovenian Pavilion, a repurposed private residence, and referencing state architectural strategies. The project also featured a series of historical paintings of flower arrangements drawn from the art collection of the National Assembly of the Republic of Slovenia. By utilising these apparently neutral and decorative images within the context of her installation, Cibic further articulated her interest in art as 'souvenir', a token of national identity.

As a further framing device, the interior of the pavilion was entirely covered with wallpaper carrying obsessively repetitive scientific illustrations of an endemic Slovene beetle, a 'failed' national icon that has almost been completely exorcised solely because of its ideologically charged name, *Anophthalmus hitleri*.

Victor Burgin has said that "the only imaginable non-political being is a totally self-sufficient hermit",⁶ alluding to the impossibility of remaining independent of the wider system in which an artist operates. If all

art is complicit to some extent with the superstructures within which it develops and operates, does even the most critical voice become muted when presented within the market driven ecosystem of biennials and exhibitions at the service of national iconography? Is non-participation the only possibility of autonomy?

As the work by Sanja Iveković suggests, self-imposed exclusion is not a solution either ("You better be represented in some way than poorly represented, and the worst is not to be represented at all"), because what does non-participation achieve? The impossibility of an autonomous voice suggests that perhaps the only option may be to work with the possibilities of being represented in some way, rather than in no way at all.

Cibic's over-identification with her role as the Slovenian representative at the Venice Biennial proposes one possible model for dealing with the problem of representation – that of becoming the mythmaking machine only to reveal in the process the inherent paradoxes and highlight the mechanisms of depoliticisation.

Notes

¹ Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, Public Affairs, New York, 2004.

² "The Institute for Government is an independent charity helping to improve government effectiveness. Institute for Government works with all the main political parties in Westminster and with senior civil servants in Whitehall, providing evidence based advice that draws on best practice from around the world." – Institute for Government mission statement, <http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/> (accessed 7 April 2013).

³ Tom Kelly, "Britain ousts the U.S. as world's most influential nation: Country tops rankings for 'soft power'", *Daily Mail Online*, 18 November 2012, updated 19 November 2012, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2234726/Britain-tops-global-soft-power-list.html#ixzz2QEWJv6VH> (accessed 6 March 2013).

⁴ 'China's Ad Campaign: To Whom Are We Selling?', Silicon Hutong, David Wolf (19 January 2011): <http://siliconhutong.com/2011/01/19/chinas-ad-campaign-to-whom-are-we-selling/>

⁵ Transcript of the performance *Pourquoi un(e) artiste ne peut représenter un État nation* by Sanja Iveković. Script by Sanja Iveković and Rada Iveković, performed at the Musée d'Art Contemporain, Val-de-Marne, France, 21 October 2012.

⁶ Victor Burgin, "Art, Common Sense and Photography", in Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall, eds., *Visual Culture: The Reader*, Sage Publications, London, 1999, p. 41.