

LIMINAL OBEDIENCE.  
OLA VASILJEVA

TEXT BY ANNA GRITZ

Spontaneous growths, mutations or internal accommodations in reaction to external stimuli are how one could describe Ola Vasiljeva's approach to the making and presenting of her work. In Turin, for example, an old-fashioned tailor shop rubbed shoulders with the art space, Quartz Studio, that had invited her to exhibit and spurred a series of works that shadowed the next-door storefront in a stealthy manner that would lay the ground for the exhibition *Qualcuno si è seduto sulla mia sedia* (2018). The suggestion that someone is sitting in one's seat invokes a sense of intrusion, a certain doubling and replacement that the engagement with the next-door tailor had prompted. The view from the street onto the entrance and window display is mirrored in a humorous manner. The well-tailored gentleman's suit on a mannequin in the store is transformed, in Vasiljeva's display, into an oversized flesh-colored garment hanging on a hook reminiscent of the cruel iconographic imagery of Saint Bartholomew carrying his own flayed skin nonchalantly over his shoulder, as if returning a freshly steamed suit from the cleaners. And who would have thought—a small yellow dry cleaners receipt can be found tucked into the seams of a stage in the space. The glamour shot of a man dress in the one window merges in Vasiljeva's vignette with a backdrop that blocks the view into the space and displays one of her characteristically quickly drawn gestural displays of a genre scene in the manner of satirical illustrations. These quickly, often on-site drafted figures interact with the more ample supplies and found objects that Vasiljeva regularly works with, such as glass and ceramics, materials saturated with the alchemical *prima materia* and created under the extreme use of force, heat and water, actions that imbue them with attri-

butes beyond their physical reach. She calls for example gold the material with the broadest shoulders (borrowing from an album title by Coil), while glass for her carries the potential for the largest libido.

This approach renders the given architectural, urban and environmental contexts as lyrical conspirators, comrades and accomplices or, in the particular case of the 18-step central staircase of the Kunstverein Munich, even co-curators of her displays. In the life of plants the phenomenon of an interior re-directioning induced by an outside factor is called tropism: not coincidentally it is also a key work of the writer Nathalie Sarraute who occupies Vasiljeva's mind and work and whose writing features in a forthcoming film by the artist. Sarraute speaks of her tropisms as: "interior movements that precede and prepare our words and actions, at the limits of our consciousness." In both Sarraute and Vasiljeva, the subconscious, irrational energies appear spurred by external forces allowing them to avoid overarching plotlines prompting singular encounters and pulsing moments to replace narrative and leave characters and linear progressions by the wayside. Despite the rejection of plot in her work and her tendency to suspend fixed definitions and empirical rules for alchemical associations between sentiments, words, materials and objects, certain shapes, materials and forms have a tendency to reappear like a cast of characters, if not always in the same guise. The bulky piano-like structure simply crafted out of plasterboard takes on, in later iterations, the shape of a bar at times called 'alcohol inky cap,' named after a common edible mushroom that only develops its toxic potential when mixed with alcohol. The bar is a mysterious contain-







er, both shelter and conductor, a site of a dangerous otherworldliness. Vasiljeva's reappearing oversized garments and unassembled pattern cuts speak to a larger interest in the question of clothing. It is however not the utilitarian everyday practical suit that fascinates her like it did the futurist Thayaht's with his TuTA one-piece or other experiments with the wearable. Instead she treats clothing like her other materials, as potential actors in an unwritten play—yet to be fully assembled and worn in. Other returning motives are chalkboards and panels with drawn figurines that also appear in the shape of glass-blown or wired bodies, rolled up carpets and syntactic cyphers.

Institutional structures reflective of society, like the theatre and the academy, play a major role in the artist's practice, yet her work is never about them per se. It is more associated with their backspaces, underpinnings, internal infrastructures and the detritus of these places—their unruly underbelly that is determined by their rules and keeps them running while continuously undermining their fundamental logic. Often her work speaks to the preparations or aftermath of a ritual, happening or performance, yet the actual event is lost. Like a synoptic incident, a missed beat or temporary lapse of consciousness, the event was skipped in favor for the liminal space that conditioned it. Determined by an anti-hierarchical sentiment, her objects are malleable in their roles and yet inform each other through intuitive, associative chains. Her quickly drawn gestures portraying figures are reminiscent of the illustrations of satirical plays and caricature, but also of educational moralistic texts from the 19<sup>th</sup> century such as the German children's book *Der Struwwelpeter* (1845). She references most famously the character Ernesto as an influence. The protagonist from Marguerite Duras' 1971 story *Ah! Ernesto!* that inspired Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet short film *En rachâchant* (1982) represents the ultimate unruly child that refuses to learn anything that he does not know already. Ernesto's attitude reflects Vasiljeva's interest in anti-pedagogical experiments and disobedient structures that rethink what it means to educate, or that initiate an unlearning process. Based on her research into revolutionary pedagogical experiments such as Antiuniversity of London and the Institute of Phenomenological Studies, she founded in 2008 The Oceans Academy of Arts (OAOA), a fictional online platform

that hosted exhibitions and summoned anonymous groupings of artists and non-artists to exercise absurdist, nonsensical expressions that refused the expectations of the institution of art for a "rather amorphous, fictional theatre."

Vasiljeva's work cherishes the ability to foster relationships and create communities with objects and beings beyond the immediate human realm be they rhetorical tools, symbols, found objects, primary materials or plants. The surreal approach simmers in her inclination to abide more to dream logic than scientific law, temporarily summoning together impulses, objects and occurrences under a spell of a particular confabulation independent of linear clock time and empirics.

*Sitting With Deep Earth*, installation view, Zefiro Torna, Centre d'art Contemporain Passerelle, Brest, 2017 Photo: Aurélien Mole (opposite page)  
*Ivan The Son of Bear*, installation view, Indipendenza Roma, Rome, 2018  
Photo: Giorgio Benni Exhibition curated by Supportico Lopez, Berlin (p. 205)  
*Gold Is the Metal With the Broadest Shoulders*, installation view, Supportico Lopez, Berlin, 2017 Photo: Linda Fuchs (pp. 206-207)  
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