

Space of Doubt

At the heart of Slovenian artist Tobias Putrih's *œuvre* lays a contradiction. His work finds its roots in the history of modernist utopian architecture, in the scientific logic of physics that he studied before becoming an artist, and in a solid pedigree that comes from being a third generation sculptor (from a family of what he characterizes as "traditional" modernists influenced by German New Objectivity," no less); yet, nearly every one of his constructions undermines the very seriousness and assuredness that their background or reference points might suggest. In fact, doubt permeates the entirety of Putrih's work.

Doubt: what a strange descriptive for the work of an artist so preoccupied with architecture. After all, isn't architecture the perennial emblem of permanence, stability, and solidity, an almost unshakable union of brick and mortar; isn't it precisely a thing that *one does not doubt*? In answer, Putrih constructs artworks haunted by calculated instability. This is apparent in his predilection for pseudo-science and experiments, creation of make-shift structures, and fascination for the way people placed in a room might hesitantly and collectively build a model. Of course, part of this sense of instability is expressed in the ad hoc mix of materials like scotch tape and corrugated cardboard so prevalent in his work: Putrih admits that during his studies he didn't produce "one object that wasn't meant to fall apart." But Putrih's doubt is more than an issue of materiality; as he underscores in the interview included in this volume, the inquiry into "how to make an object that expresses its own self-doubt, questions its own existence" was central to his work from the start and a "way to question the value of the art object as a category of thing in the world."¹

Architecture became the privileged site for this questioning, and maquettes, plans, or studies—in other words, "proposals" for objects or structures that the artist was quite aware would never, and indeed perhaps *could* never be built—became his recurrent tools. The resulting constructions are an architectonic mix that is part homage, part *détournement*. They incorporate influences that range from Bauhaus vision experiments and the futuristic architecture of Buckminster Fuller and Friederich Kiesler to the projection rooms of American cinemas and socialist village theaters, turning these conceptual and architectural models against themselves. Avant-garde "masterworks" are transformed into helium balloon-rigged, floating,

1. This citation, like all others included in this essay unless otherwise mentioned, are from the interview with Putrih included in this volume: Thom Collins, *Beautiful Constructs: An Interview with Tobias Putrih*.

twist-tie structures (*Anthropomorphic*, 2003) or dowel and rubber constructions (*Quasi Random*, 2003), to describe but two examples of Putrih's characteristic gawky forms that take tentativeness to an extreme.

The desire to marry doubt with western art and architectural models comes as a direct response to Putrih's own position and questioning as an artist from Eastern Europe. "If we want to relate ourselves to both East and West," he queried,

how can an art practice be understood outside of the East with no conceptual framework to stitch the lost years of the post-war period—those years of radically reduced cultural communication and exchange—back to the recent art history of the West? Thinking about this as a young artist, it seemed to me the only practical solution was to analyze the practices of western modernism and to try to find useful strategies for describing my experience in more broadly relevant ways."

This begins to explain how an artist from the "East" came to explore the spatial implications of art and architecture from the "West," literally sending up its utopianism with the lightness of a twist-tie.

The soft socialism of Tito's former Yugoslavia and its eventual demise inform the artist's interest in doubt and failure generally, but they also laid the foundations for his persistent focus on that particular public forum for visual and spatial attention that is the cinema theater. The sudden transformation of the cinema structure at the end of the 1990s, and the subsequent loss of access to films when the war in Yugoslavia split the country, is a reality that Putrih remembers well. Copies of classic and historic films were swept into the vaults of the Belgrade cinematheque and no longer made available to Slovenians whose only recourse was to frequent the budding, highly commercial multiplex cinemas that sprung up in the years after. Access to films marked the separation of the region and the cinema became a metaphor for the other transformations that emerged as a result of war. The prophetically titled *Lost Cinema* (2001) portends the generation who lost something symbolic and crucial in the process of national transformation and thereby lost a clear idea of itself (or so the story seems to imply) as a result. The failed futuristic space odyssey narrated via the storyboard for a film that was never made (and was, it seems, never meant to be) captured, both thematically and formally, the essential fragility and irresolution that Putrih so often deploys. And in this telling absence of a film—it too is lost—the artist also suggests all the more the persistence of his preoccupation with the structures around a film, including the preparations that might seem to make a film possible.

Another cinematic meditation, *Belgrade, Ljubljana By Chance* (2003), treats this issue by contrasting photographs of the wide screen of Belgrade's historic cinematheque with that of Ljubljana's new Kolosej multiplex. Might the plight of Putrih's generation, who "by some strange chance fell into the blind gap between those two screens," be inscribed and visible in the differences between these photographs of two seemingly blank screens? One rarely thinks of the political implications of the cinema, but through his exploration of its history and phenomenology, Putrih quietly traces not only a set of formal and art historical concerns but also ideological ones.

For Putrih, the "in-between space" of cinema, sited between the real (the street, architecture, public space) and the fictional (the fantasy realm of the film), was an ideal way to experiment with the idea of "art and design as manipulative but also potentially therapeutic and socially ameliorative practices." The resulting construction of what the artist once called "different, personified cinema theaters" thus insistently reworks that site—cinema—where the spectator's body, art, the entertainment industry, and modernity collide.² This effort manifested itself in the production of maquettes and replicated cinema screens, but also large-scale functional cinema spaces. The latter do not attempt to replicate on a 1:1 scale another cinema or cinema spaces as such, but rather conjure up an ambiguous public space between the sculptural and the architectural that discloses the social, historical, and phenomenological mechanisms operative in particular cinemas.

If doubt could, then, be described as the grammar of Putrih's various spaces and objects, *duration* could be said to be their mode of address. Repeatedly, Putrih seems preoccupied with creating forums for the experience of duration. With his functional cinemas, he effectively situates a time-bound activity—watching films—inside the perimeter of the artwork. Perhaps less evidently but no less effectively, his "quasi-game spaces," are further examples of spaces in which to *spend time*. In them, viewers sit and actively construct composite foam bunnies, functional furnishings, or other objects, as with *Baltimore Experiment* (2004) or *Mudam Studio* (2006). These different sites of collective congregation—the cinema and the game room—are thus equally concerned with the subject in (public) space over time, in other words, with what Mary Ann Doan credits film with more generally: "the production of temporalities for the spectator."³

Symptomatically, several of Putrih's cinema projects have been specifically imagined in relation to Chris Marker's haunting 1962 science fiction tale of memory and time travel, *La Jetée*. These cinemas engage performatively what they signal thematically, bringing the issue of time and its passage to the fore. For *Argos Cinema* (2007), Putrih specially conceived an elaborate cinema structure

2. Gregor Podnar, press release for exhibition *Movie Tales*, Škuc Gallery, 2001.

3. Mary Ann Doan, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, The Archive*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002, p. 24.

of wood and recycled cardboard to host Marker's visionary film. The jointed, moveable arms of the structure and the cardboard's jagged protrusions envelop the projection screen and the viewers, making a cinema that has something precarious, flexible, and intimate about it. The materials make it, literally, a mix of recycled past (the cardboard pieces through which someone once carried such things as a refrigerator or computer supplies) and an emphatic present while, in formal terms, the result looks at once futuristic and indeterminately old—like a cross between a spaceship and a stalactite-lined cave. Putrih's homespun cinema thus encircles viewers in its own brand of time travel, suspending them between eras as if to better have them experience Marker's filmic post-apocalyptic future-past.

A publication like this one with essays and interviews that explore in-depth some of the themes and sources of Putrih's work is an important effort towards documenting and understanding its complexity, but the particularity of this body of work is that it refuses to coalesce into a unified *œuvre*, in part because of a question of borders. Putrih's objects flit between science, sculpture, and architecture; between collective practices and authorial constructions; and between an object and the frame for that object. And it is this last dichotomy that is perhaps the most problematic for an art history that depends on being able to clearly define the contours and limits of the work of art, even today. In Putrih's hands, any certain distinction between the "artwork" and its "frame" loses coherence, so that the lines to be drawn around what actually constitutes his work is up for grabs. It is hardly by chance, for instance, that Putrih specially designs pedestals for his maquettes and sculptural objects that become ambiguous extensions of the artwork. This uncertain border between the work of art and its mechanism of display points to a larger ambiguity (doubt, one might say) that is at the crux of his practice.

One might argue that it should be relatively easy to treat a scale model (even one with an artful pedestal) or a functional cinema structure as if it were a discrete or autonomous object. But each directs us to a possibility outside itself and thus suggests its essential irresolution: the scale model pointing to the building it proposes to be but is not yet (and may never be), and the functional cinema gesturing toward the projected images, human presence, and temporal experience that will transform it into the truly functional structure it announces itself as being. This is particularly so because Putrih's functional cinemas are designed precisely to frame and

affect the reception of the image. Moreover, they are most often created for a specific film or specific ensembles of films organized in dialogue with a curator: think of his *Argos Cinema*, originally imagined for Chris Marker's *La Jetée*; or *Cine-club at Thomas Dane* (2005) and *Venetian, Atmospheric* (2007), each made for a specially curated selection of artists' films. Might one not argue, then, that the flickering images projected in a particular place and in a particular way are also a part of how Putrih's construction *signifies*?

"Images are significant surfaces," declares the opening line of Vilém Flusser's *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*.⁴ It's a strangely direct statement even if one can hardly imagine arguing to the contrary, except perhaps to add that the spaces and structures from which images emanate—their frames, in the widest possible sense of the word—often underwrite their very signification. *Pace* Flusser, then, frames are significant structures. And Putrih would tell you so as well. If the artist frequently concerns himself with that all-too-familiar arena of perception called the cinema, in doing so he effectively shifts our focus from the foreground to the background and back again—from the image to the architectonics and mechanisms that allow for the production and reception of (cinematic) images and back to the image as seen through that optic.

The ambiguity between image and framework is thematized in a number of projects, including *Anthology* (2005). In it, Putrih takes as a starting point an unorthodox film-viewing space that operated from 1970 to 1974 at the Anthology Film Archives in New York. Imagined by filmmaker Peter Kubelka, the aptly named Invisible Cinema was an entirely black environment meant to maximize individual viewing concentration: walls, seats, ceiling, and floor seemed to disappear in an inky opacity, with headrests placed high and flaps on the sides of each seat to prevent distractions from other viewers. The filmmaker had based the design on the premise that "the room in which one sees a film should also be a machine designed for film viewing... [making] the screen [into the viewer's] whole world, by eliminating all aural and visual impressions extraneous to film."⁵

Adapting this notion of the screen as the viewer's "whole world," Putrih takes the precise measurements of the Invisible Cinema's screen and constructs his own version for the all-white gallery space. He uses the exactly measured replica screen to revise the shape and form of the original, twisting and hanging it from a multitude of hooks and fishing wire. He thus recasts both the way the screen occupies space and the way an image might be presented on its surface. Suspended in space like a giant vortex or scientific illustration of a complex mathematical theory, Putrih's "proposal for a projection space" redirects Kubelka's immersive cinematic fantasy for the art world, making a connection between the dark room of

4. Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*. London: Reaktion Books, 2000, p. 8.

5. Cited by Putrih in his description of the project. See Sky Sitney, "The Search for the Invisible Cinema" in *Grey Room* no. 19, Spring 2005, pp. 102-113.

the cinema and modernism's white cube. In the white cube, Kubelka's screen for the projection of images becomes a sculpture in space: in short, its own image.

Anthology inescapably points to the connections between the white cube and the cinema. Readings of the ideological signification of the white cube have long suggested that its neutrality is a useful fiction. The cinema too, constructs its own fictions. Putrih doesn't claim to expose the white cube per se, but his spaces inevitably disturb the neat dichotomies between cinema spaces and exhibition spaces when he inserts one space in another. Moreover, he combats the limitations of the exhibition as a space for the passive contemplation of mute objects by making the mechanisms and architecture of cinema something to be exhibited and by bringing the logic and temporality of films into what might otherwise be an exhibition of sculptural objects. And in the informality and doubt that Putrih makes integral to all his projects, the cinema's pretense as a neutral vacuum comes undone. Countering the overwhelming tendency of cinema theaters to attempt to immerse the spectator in darkness and the seamless illusion of the narrative drama of another space and time, Putrih revives the by-gone architectures of historical cinema houses and highlights the constructedness of the space of cinema. He does this in the museum and gallery, all the better to show that the structures in which images are seen (whether projected on a screen or hung on a white wall) *matter*.

Frames, you see, are significant structures: Putrih reminds us of that. And they are significant even when, and perhaps especially if, they manage to resist the rigid assuredness and confident stability that typically accompany structures almost as a matter of principle. In Putrih's hands, doubt takes on an ideological resonance that operates against some of the commonplaces of a world that traffics in unquestioned (and unquestionable) certitude. Voltaire said it long ago, but his words remain timely: "doubt is uncomfortable, [but] certainty is ridiculous."