

## Dolores Zinny / Juan Maidagan Curtain Call for Graz

Rathaus, Hauptplatz 1

### Juli Carson Hang Fire: Maidagan and Zinny's Curtain Call

*In classical theatre, the curtain...is the bearer of the function of theatre time...When the curtain falls between two acts, it has a double role. On the one hand, it promises that we won't miss anything in the interval should we leave the hall...The lowered curtain "freezes" and "petrifies" the figures of the story and halts their time. It is only the presence of the gaze that makes the images (the figures on the stage) come to life, and it seems these images stand still the moment the curtain cuts into the field of vision.*

Alenka Zupančič, "A Perfect Place to Die."<sup>1</sup>

By lowering a curtain onto the portico of Graz's city hall, Juan Maidagan and Dolores Zinny set into motion a game. The stage is set up. In the square facing the portico—Graz's "public space"—spectators are metaphorically transformed into actors. On the other side of the curtain, administrators within city hall become the attendant audience. However, as the artists point out, this stage is simultaneously *upset* by the curtain's ambivalent position. Perhaps it is the "public" that functions as the audience to the actors *within* city hall? In reality, *Curtain Call's* demarcation anamorphically cuts across the field of our gaze. In the process, our quotidian actions are frozen and something ordinarily repressed is revealed: the paradoxical nature of public space.

Maidagan and Zinny's gesture at once continues and negates another historic "curtain" that (unwittingly) set a similar game into motion. In that other instance, however, the game ends in the project's demise. Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc*, mounted in New York City's Federal Plaza, was destroyed in 1989 after the infamous trial that pitted the so-called "art world" public and the non-art world public against each other. What Serra, in his utopian vision of site-specificity, failed to understand was the manner in which the administrators within the US Federal Building would transform themselves from a passive audience of Serra's work to actors on the public stage determined to tear down what they called the "Berlin Wall of Foley Square." When *Tilted Arc* was destroyed—an act that took place at midnight under cover of darkness—Serra saw it as a public execution. Actor/Audience. Audience/Actor. The relationship endlessly shifts the way the pronouns You/I shift endlessly in conversation. Just who is addressing whom? It depends, of course, on the situation. Back to *Curtain Call*. In conceiving the work, Maidagan and Zinny were influenced by Borges' short story, *The Secret Miracle*. In it, the protagonist, Jaromir Hladik, is a playwright living in Nazi-occupied Prague arrested for being Jewish and opposing the Anschluss. Sentenced to die by firing

squad, his only concern is his unfinished tragedy, *The Enemies*. The night before his death, Hladik prays to God that he be granted a year to finish his play. A voice speaks to him, promising: "The time for your labor has been granted." The next day, at the moment of his execution, a "hang-fire" occurs—a delay between the executioners' triggering of their firearms and the ignition of the powder that would expel the bullets that would eventually kill Hladik. In that frozen second, spread out in his mind over the span of a year, Hladik reflects upon and completes his play. Once it is done, Hladik is struck dead by the once-delayed volley. The reader is left asking: What is an audience? What is a production? In Borges' tale, the playwright is both audience and producer, meaning the play has no incidence in the real (political) world. If *Curtain Call* freezes a moment in which audience and actor are similarly conflated, it does so with the intention of making something in the world *happen*—something entirely eclipsed in Hladik's fictional case or repressed by Serra's *Tilted Arc*. What is this thing? It is the dual commitment to avant-garde aesthetics and contemporary discourses of public space—wherein the artist's intentionality is but one factor in a game of infinitely exchangeable, contingent subject positions.

*Curtain Call's* color and dimensionality mime the city hall's architecture. Neither frame nor negation, the work is a monument to the tactics of avant-garde site-specificity—"the scale, size and location of the work being determined by the typography of the site." At the same time, *Curtain Call* solicits opposing meanings that arise (from its ambiguous position in the square) as an "instance" of public space. This is what Serra failed to

see—that the *babel of voices* that define the public sphere was just as much *Tilted Arc's* site as was its physical space. The more Serra defied these voices, the more threatening *Tilted Arc* became. Some detractors even feared it would become a "blast wall for terrorists." Ironically, when avant-garde tactics of abstraction maintain utopian ideals of a singular public sphere, dystopian politics ensue. Like Borges' Hladik, the homogeneous site of *Tilted Arc's* specificity had no incidence in the real world.

*Curtain Call* conjures up an infinite number of disparate, real "curtains" that came before it. The memory of these curtains "appear" in Graz's public square as we recall them in our mind's eye. As in a "curtain call"—"the appearance of one or more performers on stage after a performance"—the likes of Daniel Buren, Dan Graham, Michael Asher, Francis Alys or Renee Green come to life on this global stage of critical aesthetics. For it is here that we negotiate the relationship between abstraction and politics, history and memory, vis-à-vis a curtain that is at once metaphorically lowered and drawn. An effect is produced like the final second of Hladik's life—"a second composed of a thousand seconds, frozen into action"—wherein infinite combinations of avant-garde strategies take place. This time a public audience, who are also actors, plays the game, producing a type of public Happening. And if this game follows Kaprow's mandate that "Happenings can only happen once," it does so by encouraging the simultaneous – and infinitely contradictory – experience of the game that we hold in our minds while walking in real time. This is *Curtain Call's* performative "picture" of public space.

<sup>1</sup> Alenka Zupančič, "A Perfect Place to Die: Theatre in Hitchcock's Films," in: ed. Slavoj Žižek, *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Lacan, But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock* (New York: Verso, 1992).