

Curtain and Half-Curtain

A curtain made of gray, silver, yellow, and black stripes of silk hangs down the portico of the city hall in Graz, Austria, obscuring the main access to the mostly classic palace. Placed at different angles and depths, the strips of fabric offered a cohesive visual unit despite the various ripples created by the tension on the silk and the outdoor conditions. The wavy patterns on the fabric are reminiscent of a specific kind of theater curtain known as *Austrian drape*, which lifts in scalloped shapes. Despite its frontal placing, access to the building was uninterrupted through the portico's arcades. Although monumental, the overall impression of this structure and its luscious fabric left outdoors points to a provisional, temporary installation.

Curtain Call for Graz was the project presented by Dolores Zinny and Juan Maidagan for the exhibition *Utopia and Monument*, organized by Sabine Breitweiser in 2009. Their architectural intervention – a curtain in the entrance of a public building – effectively altered the civic landscape and the dynamics between Graz's citizens and their city hall. Zinny and Maidagan's project visually amplified the main access to the building by covering it with a shiny curtain, draped in a style bearing the name of the nation. The artists capitalized on the theatricality embedded in the space to strength the symbolic elements of the urban plan: an open plaza in front of a grand building. The opposite spaces reserved for fiction (the play) and non-fiction (the audience) are articulated by this curtain. The opposite spaces reserved for daily life and its bureaucratic counterpart are suddenly presented under the spotlight of representation. The curtain invokes a stage, an audience and a representation in a theater larger than life. To deepen this baroque take in the public sphere, the curtain of Zinny and Maidagan functions also as a membrane able to tease out the theatricality involved in performing citizenship.

Viewers—let's call them spectators too—have no need to be invited to participate in *Curtain Call for Graz*. It is not an imposing game demanding a direct response from the audience but rather the fine-tuning of a category: everyone in the square or the city hall is performing a role either on the stage or as an audience member. The plot is loose but the conditions under which one performs are presented on the stage.

The curtain's conspicuous folds and drapes create a tridimensional structure (10 x 13 x 1.5 m) with no front and back. The invisible stage might be on one side or the other, the audience could be anywhere, the performers everywhere. The audience might even be produced by the spectacle as a fictive category.

In 1968, Argentinian artist Marta Minujín devised *Minucode*, a project for the CIAR (Center for Inter-American Relations, now America's Society, in New York city) where she tried to conflate the role of the performer and the audience as a mirror onto which social dynamics are observed. Influenced by Marshall McLuhan's theories on media and subjectivity, Minujín identified potential participants for her

project through a simple but idiosyncratic questionnaire she published in the New York press, where she lived at the time, asking readers, among many other things, if they belonged to the world of business, politics, art or fashion. After sorting all the information, Minujín organized four cocktail parties in the empty gallery, and had a crew film the first ten minutes of each gathering. Weeks later, all participants were invited again to the gallery, this time to watch the films projected floor to ceiling, covering the wall surface like a curtain. To aggrandize the power of media over reality, Minujín urged her guests to wear the same clothes they wore the day of the filming.

Minujín attempted to deliver the perfect crime, a closed circuit of communication between the audience and its staged image, with little room for someone else. Minujín was also interested in class and social codes, and the *Minucode* was a narcissistic device to allow random social groups to inhabit their image in the gallery space.

The same year Minujín developed her *Minucode*, the crucial 1968, Raoul Vaneigem discusses nihilism and spectacle. In his "Lipstick Traces," American historian Greil Marcus quotes Vaneigem quoting Rozanov rounded up with a Guy Debord's quote. Christopher Wool in an untitled painting from 1990 has also used this quote as a motif:

"Rozanov's definition of nihilism is the best: The show is over. The audience get up to leave their seats. Time to collect their coats and go home. They turn around. ... No more coats and no more home." "The spectator feels at home nowhere," Debord wrote, "because the spectacle is everywhere."¹

The curtain in the portico of city hall does not have any definitive marker of time. It is impossible to know if the show is about to start or if the curtain is concealing the change of scenery between acts. However, the title, *Curtain Call for Graz* unmistakably announces the aftermath of a theatrical representation. Curtain calls bring the sense of closure to an agreement; it is the truly last scene before the spell of the suspension of disbelief has completely vanished. The audience responds to the performance by making clear and loud its level of satisfaction. Both parts of the equation are visible. Time to collect the coats and go home (if there is still one to go to).

All these symbolic transactions take place with the curtain drawn closed. The curtains of Zinny and Maidagan are not furnished with a mechanism to open or close them according to the dramatic needs of a plot. They stand as permeable, porous walls heightening the theatrical qualities of the space where they are displayed. As in all Zinny and Maidagan's projects, their curtains exist in close relationship to the surrounding architecture. *Curtain Call* (2003) was a Zinny and Maidagan project for the exhibit *Strategies of Survival*, organized by Carlos Basualdo in the 50th Venice Biennale. The exhibition gathered more than a dozen artists dealing with the consequences of the





political, economic and social crisis in developing countries. To the exhibition question of “how [do] artists and architects react to these conditions, and which aesthetic forms of survival and resistance they develop,”² Zinny and Maidagan presented two fabric structures, almost identical, facing each other from opposite walls of the room. This time the fabric chosen by the artists was canvas, raw on the surface of the curtain but yellow, mustard and black in the asymmetric folds and crevices.

These two hybrid objects, while half way between a folding screen and a curtain – with the proportions of neither – suggested the limits of a stage in the area between them, populated by a few other works from the exhibition (props?) and visitors. To describe them, the word “curtain” would not necessarily come to mind if it were not part of the title, and even the title refers to an action (curtain call) not to their definition.

One of the strategies Bertolt Brecht employed to avoid the complete alienation of the audience by the story told on stage was the half-curtain. A half-curtain (usually the height of an actor) is large enough to hide props or facilitate costume changes but also short enough not to disappear on the stage. These curtains, imperfectly mirroring each other, do not hang nor cover the walls from floor to ceiling. In their strategic placing, they are more than a Brechtian’s half-curtain, concealing and disclosing at once. Yet these two half-curtains, almost identical, do not aspire to symmetry or completion.

In a memorable sequence of Luis Buñuel’s film from 1972, *The Discreet Charm of Bourgeoisie*, six upper-class characters seated around a luxurious dining table await for the butler to serve their meal. After the servant drops the tray, the diners realize the fowl on the tray were props. Suddenly, the small lamps on the side tables are lit, strange, unexplained noises interrupt the scene and the dining room’s red curtain opens to reveal an audience. Some of the characters run off, a couple of women remain waiting, disconcerted, and the Catholic priest exits the stage whispering the lines provided by the prompter.

Such a Good Cover, a project developed in 2003 for the DAAD Gallery in Berlin, featured also a canvas curtain that covered, as a second skin, more than forty meters of the gallery walls, sparing a room where Zinny and Maidagan showed collages. The canvas had yellow, green, pink, and black stripes sown to it, creating folds and flat pockets in the seemingly continuous sort of fabric wallpaper. Again, Zinny and Maidagan drew from the logic of theater to reorganize the space: the seams of the curtain, the “front,” faced the wall and not the room, turning the gallery into an enclosed stage. Visitors behaved as unseen performers, momentarily secluded in a theatrical space that is not suited for spectacle.

If the other curtains in Graz and Venice announced the end of the show, or the encounter between the performers and their audience, the Berlin curtain called for a more solitary experience, before or after the play.

Jorge Luis Borges, an assiduous theater-goer in his youth, never wrote a play. The baroque conception of the world as a stage, and life as a dream, resonates greatly – filtered through mirrors and nightmares – throughout his writing. The two pages of “Everything and Nothing” in his collection of stories *The Maker* (1960)³ recount a playwright’s weariness and terror before his masks. His name is revealed at the end of the story, when God speaks to him from a too theatrical whirlwind: “I dreamed the world as you dreamed your work, my Shakespeare, and among the shapes of my dream are you, who, like me, are many persons—and none.”



- 1 Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990.
- 2 Text by the curator in the webpage *Universes in Universes*. 50th Venice Biennale: <http://universes-in-universe.de/car/venezia/bien50/survival/e-press.htm>
- 3 “Everything and Nothing,” in English in the original, was published in the collection of stories *El Hacedor [The Maker]* (1960). The quote is from Jorge Luis Borges, *Dreamtigers*, Translation by Mildred Boyer and Harold Morland. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985.