

## Renata Salecl. What's behind the symbolic fiction?

Vadim Fishkin's art projects question the relationship between the subject and the social symbolic structure which Jacques Lacan named the big Other. The main problem for Fishkin is how does the subject deal with the big Other, i.e. how does he or she try to make a mark on the symbolic structure, as well as how does the subject respond to the demands that come from the Other. The "One Man Show" exhibition exemplifies the subject's dilemma when faced with an unrecognizable agency, the voice, which demands a response from the subject and consequently makes he or she utterly guilty. When the visitor enters the exhibition space, he or she sees numerous slide projectors showing images of artwork. The visitor cannot focus on the work presented, since he or she is, on the one hand, bombarded with too many slides being projected at the same time, and is on the other hand drawn to the strange tower in the middle of the room from which the projectors operate. But entering the tower doesn't give a solution to the subject's question about the nature of the show. When the visitor enters the tower, a voice machine turns on and starts asking strange questions about the subject's impressions on the art work: the visitor is thus demanded to make speculations on something that he or she actually didn't see; those responses are recorded by the machine. This work thus shows how the subject, confronted with uncertainty in regard to the show, seeks refuge in the tower, where he or she is confronted with an even more traumatic situation: the place of refuge suddenly turns into a place where one is bombarded with the master's voice, making the subject feel guilty for not knowing what the exhibition is about. Reading transcripts of the people's responses shows how the majority of the visitors started answering the questions in a relaxed, cheerful way, but their enthusiasm quickly vanished when they were confronted with questions demanding personal opinions about the artist's intention with this show. Many visitors simply disappeared from the tower, or started mumbling in an incomprehensible way, as if they were at an exam in which the teacher had caught them on something they didn't know but were supposed to. The problem of the visitors confronted with the impersonal voice in the tower is that they know very well that the voice is just part of the game; however, they quickly start taking the invisible machine as a master demanding serious responses from them. People thus react as if they know that the machine is just a fraud, a joke made by the artist, but they nonetheless succumb to it, i.e. they start to take it as an actual agency which has power over them. The strength of Fishkin's project is to show how, in today's symbolic universe, people know very well that there is no master who is in charge, or that the agencies at the place of power are nothing but artificial creations, but although people don't believe in these masters, they nonetheless feel guilty when confronted with master-like figures. Fishkin's art thus illustrates, in an excellent way, the nature of a certain disbelief that one observes in contemporary society when it comes to identification with the symbolic order, i.e. the big Other, which incites people to search for a secret behind the symbolic fiction. What does this disbelief in the big Other mean? We always knew that the big Other is just a fiction, and that people somehow pretend when they follow state, religious, or family rituals. Most of the time we only believe that someone else believes in these rituals, which is why we follow them; in order to avoid offending the others. This belief in the belief of others is well exemplified in the parents' pretence that they're playing Santa Claus because children believe in it. But when children find out that Santa Claus is just a fiction, they go on pretending to believe in it, so as not to offend their parents, who still think that their children believe. What we have today is precisely a disbelief in the fiction of the big Other. The logic of this disbelief is exemplified in a well-known anecdote from the Marx brothers. When Graucho Marx was caught in an obvious lie, his response was: "Who do you believe - my words or your eyes?" The belief in the big Other is the belief in words, even when they contradict one's own eyes. What we have today is therefore precisely a mistrust in mere words (i.e. in the symbolic fiction). People want to see what is behind the fiction. But the encounter with what is behind that fiction can be most traumatic to the subject. An example of the fictional character of the big Other are the rules of politeness in speech. When we meet someone, we usually say, "How nice to see you", even if we actually think,

"Drop dead, I really hate you." If we stop using polite words, we don't achieve a simple liberation from the fictional character of politeness, but encounter a violence which radically disrupts social bonds. Similarly, a visitor to the art show who tries to penetrate the secret behind the installations doesn't find a liberating answer to his or her dilemma, but encounters a mysterious (violent) voice, which returns the questions to he or she, thus making the visitor feel utterly guilty. Fishkin further explores the nature of the subject's identification with symbolic power in his "Home-TV-Installation", in which the artist, via national TV, asks viewers to follow his instructions in decorating their TV sets and then send photos of these installations to him. Fishkin thus mockingly played with television's ideological power; surprisingly, his viewers responded willingly to his demand. Their response can be understood as the anonymous viewers' attempt to find a recognizable place in the symbolic network. It's crucial that Fishkin promises people who are willing to respond to his demands that they'll be included in the exhibition, and might even get a special prize: a 5 minute live appearance on TV, or a small pocket TV set. (The actual winner of the prize, however, couldn't decide between the two offers and asked to have both.) The question of how the subject can find his or her place in the symbolic order is also dealt with in Fishkin's project "Dedicated To ". The visitor is first asked by a special machine to identify himself or herself, and after the visitor suddenly hears a public announcement of his or her name, to whom a special fireworks display has been dedicated. The horrifying moment of this show is precisely when the person's name is suddenly uttered by the anonymous loudspeaker in the museum space. It is as if the subject is suddenly interpolated by an invisible authority, i.e. the subject gets a special place in the symboli network, but he or she doesn't know who the authority is and what the fireworks mean. Fishkin further explores the issue of the subject's place within the symbolic in his last work, which offers visitors of the show a chance to obtain the image of a place exactly on the other side of the world, i.e. on the opposite side of their placement on our planet. Paradoxically, the reverse side is almost always somewhere in the deep ocean - thus the most a visitor can get is a picture of the underwater world. The secret of our place thus remains nothing but a secret.

The strength of Fishkin's art lies precisely in the fact that, using different artistic material, he seems to be dealing with the same problem again and again. This problem concerns the changed nature of the subject's identification with the symbolic order that we encounter in today's society. Fishkin thus perfectly illustrates how people distrust dominant authorities today, and even sometimes believe in the possibility of creating their own identities independently of the visible and invisible mechanisms which dominate their social space. Similarly, people distrust the institutions and rituals of their society and are endlessly concerned with the question: what is behind the symbolic fiction? But as Fishkin's art shows very well, our symbolic order is nothing but a fiction and the search for the secret behind it brings us either to an encounter with some hidden violence or to another secret. The only thing a visitor to Fishkin's show can do is simply enjoy the firework and try to forget that uncanny voice dedicated it to him or her. But, as psychoanalysis teaches us, enjoyment in the meaning of the painful jouissance is what people usually try desperately to avoid.

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