

INTRODUCING // AMALIA PICA

Mixed Signals

Amalia Pica explores our fraught attempts at information exchange

BY COLIN PERRY

OBJECTS ARE NOTORIOUSLY untrustworthy tools for communicating ideas. This puts the thoughtful artist in a quandary. To address it, might she not, rather than create physical things, ask viewers to pass some kind of competence test or else seek to use a more evanescent medium to reflect the world's variable contingencies?

The Argentinean-born, London-based artist Amalia Pica's ingenious solution is to highlight the instability of both art and public memory: the false starts and dead

ends in everyday communication, the power of false memories, the absurd manner in which cultures and governments have sought to control the way we think. Her slide projections, sculptures, and drawings are tightly arranged to communicate their own (necessarily limited) communicability, exploring the patterns by which meaning transmutes into myth and echoes of ideas without apparent origins.

Pica's work often deals with the emptying out of significance from situations where

it would appear to be most prominent or necessary. Several recent pieces, for example, have explored communication as a vacant pantomime. In the 2010 35-millimeter slide projection *Babble, Blabber, Chatter, Gibber, Jabber, Patter, Prattle, Rattle, Yammer, Yada, Yada, Yada*, the artist stands in a barren landscape brandishing semaphore flags that, in a wry tautology, spell out the words in the title. The subtle humor of the work lies in the fact that the figure's gesticulations belong to a form of



AMALIA PICA, MARC FOX, LOS ANGELES, AND DIANA STIGTER, AMSTERDAM



communication too specialized for most viewers to understand—secretly, one hopes the flags say something obscene or outlandish—as well as in the energy wasted using such a terse and urgent communication system for prolix waffle. For the 16-millimeter film *To Everyone that Waves*, 2005, Pica organized a modest performance in which white handkerchiefs were distributed to passengers boarding an old-fashioned sailing ship departing Amsterdam's docks as well as to passers-by on the shore; although not instructed or directed in any way, the two groups immediately set about waving to each other. The most remarkable aspect of this event is that waving to loved ones with handkerchiefs is largely a cinematic construction, reinforced by the convention of narrative cinema rather than by historical evidence.

If cinema constructs false memories with accidental oblivion (and many film theorists would dispute that this process is accidental), some social institutions seek to articulate formative memories with more deliberate and sinister intent. National educational curricula and pedagogical methods are, in one sense, what Pica describes as “effective means of reproducing the status quo.” Her contribution to the 54th Venice Biennale was an installation featuring *Under the Spotlight*, 2011, in which a pair of spotlights projects onto the gallery wall colored circles that overlap to form a Venn diagram, a classic visual aid for teaching set theory. This simple pedagogic tool may appear innocent, but to the Argentinean dictators of the mid 1970s, the Venn

diagram represented the subversive intermingling of human possibilities—the democracy of mathematics, perhaps. The authorities banned its use in classrooms in a wild manifestation of paranoia that in retrospect seems almost charmingly obscure—indeed, we have only Pica's word that such censorship ever occurred. The Venice installation also included the 2011 series of drawings “School sheets in adjusted scale (or an exercise in how to go back to all the things I hadn't thought of yet),” which reproduces the grids of textbooks that, while still used in classrooms across the country, are objects of nostalgia for many Argentineans.

Honeyed memories can be as affective and manipulative as government propaganda. In Pica's early *Hora Cátedra*, 2002, a yellow light was projected onto the white façade of the Casa Histórica de la Independencia in Tucuman (many Argentineans believe the building is yellow because it is reproduced in that color in many textbooks) for 40 minutes, the duration of a class, while the artist, dressed in the country's standard white school uniform, announced the start and end of the period by ringing a bell. In her 2008 work *10-3-66*, she explored another cultural memory by providing visitors with white bicycles on which to navigate her solo exhibition “Sorry for the Metaphor” in the hangarlike space of Artis Den Bosch, Amsterdam. The reference was to the White Bicycle Plan that the left-wing Provo movement submitted in 1965 to Amsterdam authorities and that would have closed the city center to motorized traffic while supplying thousands of free

white bicycles for everybody to use. When no one took up their proposal, the Provos strewed the streets with 50 of these bikes, which the police subsequently impounded.

Although Pica's work is often specific to a site or situation, it is also concerned with migratory routes and ideas of transition, passage, and dislocation. Her 2009 installation *Moon Golem*, for example, centers on a photograph of a figurine, disquietingly like a voodoo doll, that astronaut David Scott deposited on the moon in 1971 without NASA's knowledge. The figure—*Fallen Astronaut*, 1971, by Paul Van Hoyendonck—was the first artwork in space and part of a shrine commemorating astronauts who died there. Pica's installation incorporating the photo, touches on a recurrent theme in her work: that creating art is like sending objects into space—in art, at least, Bishop Berkeley's precept that “to be is to be perceived” rings true. Who, after all, will see Van Hoyendonck's figure in the flesh today?

If *Moon Golem* speaks of celestial myths, Pica's 2011 work *I am Tower of Hamlets, as I am in Tower of Hamlets, just like a lot of other people are* weaves together migration, place, and identity in one moveable object: a stone sculpture of an echeveria, an unspectacular but hardy plant that originated in Mexico and South America and is now a stalwart of gardens the world over. Rather than being shown in London's Chisenhale Gallery, which commissioned it, the carving travels from home to home in East London. Like all of Pica's work, it enacts the behavioral twitches of a globalized society seeking a sense of specificity, memory, and identity. MP



FROM TOP: Moon Golem, 2009. Installation with spotlight, mirror on plinth, and framed photograph from NASA.

Sorry for the Metaphor #2, 2010. Black-and-white laser copies, 8½ x 12 ft.

OPPOSITE: Still from Babble, Blabber, Chatter, Gibber, Jabber, Patter, Prattle, Rattle, Yammer, Yada, Yada, Yada, 2009. Sequence of 80 35 mm slides, handmade flags.

FROM TOP: ROGER WOOLDRIDGE, AMALIA PICA, AND MARC FOX; AMALIA PICA, MARC FOX, AND DIANA STIGTER