

POLITENESS AND HOW TO ACQUIRE IT

Jovana Stokic Meets Ana Prvacki

Though the realm of social etiquette is often considered frivolous and decorative, it duly broaches a discomfort related to class, gender, and power. These are the relationships that interest Ana Prvacki, who turns the realm of propriety into a performative situation, using societal norms as raw material.

Earlier in her career, the artist initiated Ananatural Production (2003-2010), conceived as a "conceptual factory of ideas ranging from the practical to absurd, creating products which offered shortcuts to better living and designs for needs we never knew we had." As such, Prvacki's practice corresponds to the late capitalist service economy by mimicking its patterns of production, distribution and consumption – but with a twist. Her strategic interventions consist of creating services that are not consumerist in nature; instead, they aim to ameliorate one's life as a small individualist utopia reached via a gentle transformative action.

This concern for amelioration of everyday life is evidenced in Greeting Committee, Prvacki's commission for dOCUMENTA (13). The project consists of three parts: a conversation and training on etiquette with dOCUMENTA staff; a lecture by Kwame Anthony Appiah, an expert of cosmopolitanism; and a series of six 'Public Service Announcements,' instructional etiquette videos shown in service areas. Pre-filmed in Los Angeles, the Greeting Committee videos are strategically positioned in relation to the multi-venue organism of the exhibition. Her performative situations, in which embarrassments are assuaged by instructional empathy, are mirrored in the act of viewing the videos themselves in situ. The videos also include sketch comedy group, The iNTECOLLECTUALS, and the etiquette expert, Vartouhi Keshishyan.

The artist suggests we can rescue the term "etiquette", as it is ultimately an ethical dilemma far beyond assumptions of good and bad, right or wrong, or behavior modification; instead, "it is about doing our best to treat another with dignity. Even the

worst faux pas can be an occasion to learn and bond. How we relate to others is an intricate, playful, amusing and at times exasperating concoction of emotions, prejudices, projections, and transgenerational histories. And it is contagious."

The dialogue that follows was conducted to mirror this format of artistic expression and thematic concern, with the critic utilizing 'prompts' to gently probe the bounds of artistic practice and performativity. As such, the very format of an interview itself enacts its own form of etiquette, using politeness as a means to assert authority.

Five Polite Points

JOVANA STOKIC Your video *Greeting Committee* permeates all strata of the exhibition as institution. It is positioned outside as well as inside the exhibition proper, inhabiting inter-space between exhibition and service area? Is it anti-VIP?

ANA PRVACKI Anti-VIP may not be the right term, as the project is not necessarily against VIP, not against anyone, but an attempt to treat everyone the same way, an attempt to practice equanimity and equality. Vartouhi Keshishyan told me once that "we should not have two sets of manners, one for those who we think are important and we want to impress and one for those who we think are not important." So this idea of equanimity which you find in most basic etiquette manuals is quite similar to spiritual and religious teachings around the world, to treat everyone with equality, to love your neighbor...but let's be realistic: loving everyone is too far a stretch, manners before love, and maybe manners lead to love. It is about Cosmopolitanism, learning



tolerance and practicing a kind of pluralist focus.

Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev suggested the locations after our conversations and watching the videos, and I think it works super well with the piece, positioned within the service area and outside the actually gallery spaces. It is a space “in between”, in a sense, a maybe space, a *maybe* space. They blend in, they could be perceived as general info for the show. Almost invisible, yet everyone has seen it, or maybe felt it. They are in this space where people are doing something else, getting their wallet, standing in line, getting their pass,

looking at a map, figuring out their path, preparing to see art inside the museum; and there is always the question, or rather the doubt: “have you seen it correctly?”

JS You collaborated with different people on several levels – from the filming of the videos, to inviting guests and holding workshops, to greeting the audience.

AP There are many levels of collaboration. Of course first being the conversations with Christov-Bakargiev and Chus Martínez. The videos were shot and conceptualized together with Shane Valentino, who is an amazing art director

in Los Angeles. We wanted the videos to operate in the spirit of PSAs and have a smooth production value, a kind of commercial for ethics and morals.

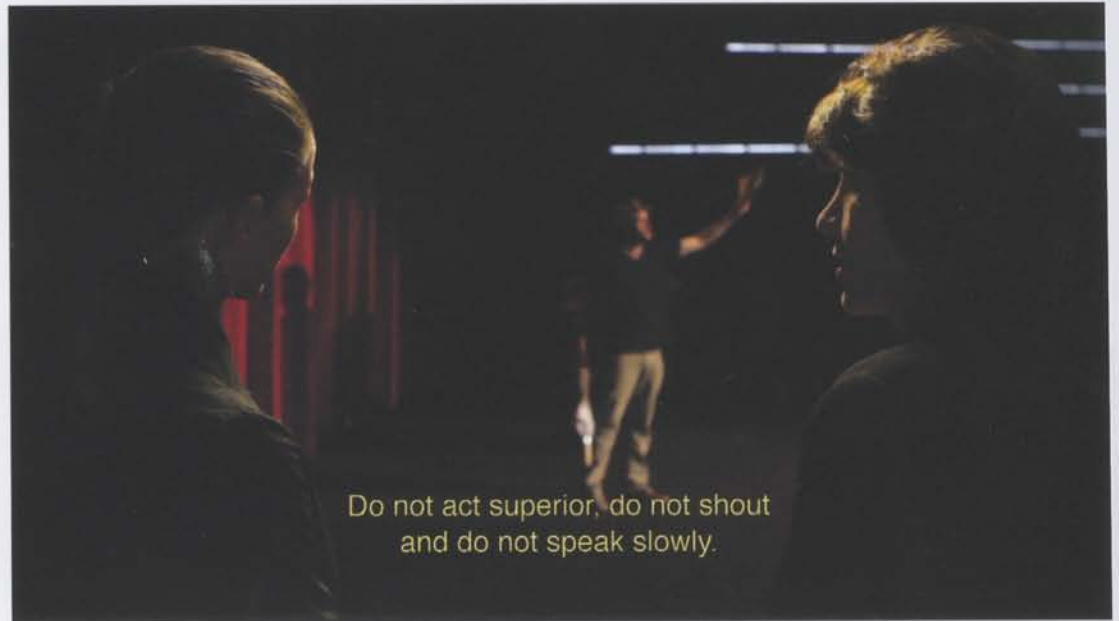
I have been working with Vartouhi Keshishyan for over a year now; she is an Armenian-Ukrainian etiquette instructor who works with the Armenian and Middle Eastern community in Los Angeles, helping them assimilate to life in America. We really connected and have similar histories and our interest in etiquette comes from the personal experience of family and political conflict. She has become an inspiration and an advisor, and is in all the videos.

For me the comedic potential of a *faux pas* was a very important part of the idea, so there is also the collaboration with the LA comedy group The iNTECOLLECTUALS; I think it had this curious union of commedia dell’arte meets Brecht.

And in the weeks leading up to the opening, I worked with the German etiquette society in Kassel, the Knigge-Rat, on a series of workshops for the DOCUMENTA staff where we addressed the basics of social performance. We had about 500 participants.

Scott Sternberg from the Band of Outsiders made my ‘uniform’ for the workshops,

Page 17 and above Ana Prvacki with Shane Valentino, *Greeting Committee PSAs*, 2012, video still, installation shot *DOCUMENTA* (13), Friedrichsplatz Walther König Bookshop, Kassel, Germany. All images courtesy Ana Prvacki, Shane Valentino and Lombard Freid Gallery, New York. Photo: Richard Kasiewicz







which is a ladybug pant suit. Ladybugs have become the emblem for the etiquette project, the civilized, educated and mannered lady merged with the primal, unconscious, mud rolling, raw bug living together respectfully and without conflict, neither wanting to change the other. And of course I think of Professor Kwame Anthony Appiah's lectures on manners as

an essential part of the project. His book, *Cosmopolitanism*, was very important and I was thrilled when he accepted the invitation to join us in Kassel. So it was very important for me that we address the issue of etiquette from different perspectives and angles.

JS In the *DOCUMENTA* catalogue, you wrote with your

collaborator Irina Aristarkhova about the notion of radical hospitality. I am invested in this notion of gentle change through welcoming. How do you reset the guest-host dynamic?

AP For me, radical hospitality is a discreet call for improvement and zooming in on small, concrete gestures in the realm of so-called REAL LIFE.

Etiquette and hospitality are about a certain hypersensitivity towards others, anticipating their needs and caring for their comfort, but also a DIY etiquette as an internal, personal practice and negotiating the two. And maybe that is the ghost, the guest+host Duchamp proposes. There is always a danger of the overly eager host turning the guest into



immigrated to Singapore when Yugoslavia fell apart, and I currently live in Los Angeles. Having always felt like a foreigner (or sometimes even an enemy), I have come to think of manners and protocols as survival tools that help to assimilate and adapt.

How we perform ourselves is the greatest challenge and how we relate to others is an intricate, playful, amusing and at times exasperating concoction of emotions, prejudices, projections and transgenerational histories.

Moving to LA I was concerned that I would not be welcomed and the way to deal with that anxiety was to work on welcoming *it*.

I am thinking of Watteau's *fête galante* and social performance, and Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*.

JS I especially welcome your stance against the oversimplification that equals feminine-being with welcoming.
AP From Kant to Derrida, we have these Ideas of the feminine as innately hospitable. There has of course been a lot of critique towards this position.

I disagree with the romantic ideas of authenticity of self, and the idea that we perform ourselves in an authentic way, especially when so many people suffer from anxiety, and especially social anxiety. I personally am a social elephant rather than a social butterfly, which is one of the reasons why this subject interests me; and the potential to transform, be more welcoming, surrender, collapse. "Assume a virtue you do not have," as Shakespeare put it.

Previous Spread

Ana Prvacki with Shane Valentino, Greeting Committee PSAs, 2012, video still **Left** *Ana Prvacki with Shane Valentino, Greeting Committee PSAs, 2012, installation shot* *DOCUMENTA (13), Hauptbahnhof, Kassel, Germany. Photo: Rosa Maria Rühling*

a hostage. It is a very delicate choreography of power and restraint, control and loss, and these are actually the foundation of slapstick.

JS How did your personal history influence the performing of the role of the hostess?

AP I am half Serbian, half Romanian, my parents