

ANDREA LANGE – about «Adhan Corner»

Andrea Lange interviewed by Jean-Charles Massera for the exhibition catalogue, *Fundamentalisms of the New Order* at Charlottenborg, Copenhagen 2002.

Published in "Fundamentalisms of the New Order", p. 67-70, NIFCA publication #23, ISBN: 951-8955-75-1, 2004

- Shall we hear the prayer call in your audio-installation "Adhan Corner" as a fictional piece or as a piece that can be used by people who would like to pray?

Both... It's a fictional element that is actually authentic, that has an authentic use and value. I'm not making the prayer call, it's not like I paint the nature, it is the actual thing. If I had just put the call at random times, if I had chosen the playing-times myself, it would have been a lousy work of art, and it would have been a way to objectify Muslim culture and practices. When you hear the prayer call it's the actual time when Muslims pray at this specific place, it points out the reality of something that is happening around you. I want you to be part of this reality. I want to bring the actual situation you live in even closer to you.

- But aren't you afraid that people could come to the show and hear this sound work in the same way the western petty bourgeoisie go and visit foreign countries and watch foreign cultural practices from a tourist point of view, a point of view which objectify any cultural practice?

No, I am not afraid of that. Then we would have to stop making serious discussions in art... For me art has a lot of possibilities. It's not leisure. I would rather say the prayer call and the Muslim practice gets protected in this piece and not objectified.

What's interesting is that some people tried to stop an actual mosque in Norway to call for prayer... not my piece. It was an attack on democratic rights. After the first Mosque was raised in Oslo, an application was put forward for permission to call for Friday prayer, the main prayer. The case gained great attention in the media as hostility towards all foreign and other related motives surfaced. The Norwegian right-wing "Fremskrittspartiet" proposed to the Norwegian parliament a change of the constitution to give the Christian state-religion legal priority over other religions practised in the country. This proposal was turned down by the Norwegian

parliament, but the case was brought all the way to the office of the County Commissioner. In her verdict, the County Commissioner appraised the prayer call against the criminal code, the International Convention for civil and political rights as well as the European Convention for Human Rights. She concluded that no legal authority exists that prohibits the call of prayer. So now you can hear the prayer call every Friday from the mosque in Oslo.

When I made this piece in Norway, it was interesting to place it in the city of Bergen where the Muslims didn't already have this practice; it was actually the first time it happened, just like here in Copenhagen right now. There is no mosque in Denmark...and there are websites where people gather to fight against the construction of a mosque. It's a major issue, when people from the majority-population think they should decide, whether the minority can express their religious practices. This is a very strong part of the whole process of oppressing a minority.... A lot of people are not really aware that it is a very serious problem.

- In a way don't you think the fact to be placed here, near a show, deactivates the meaning of the prayer call? Wouldn't it be more efficient somewhere else, far away from the museum and the context of the show?

When the call to prayer becomes a work of art, a new important layer is put on to it: it will put freedom of expression in art into question as well.

- I know but still, if people experience your piece after having seen other things in the show, they can misread it, in the way that they can experience for instance the beauty of the call, of the sound without thinking about the fact that it functions as an actual prayer call, that it has this "authentic use and value" you were talking about...

The reflections that people make from their experience is not to be limited by what I point out in ex this interview. But people have to inform themselves about the context and content of an artwork... I'm not responsible for the misreading of a piece.

This work fights for art in a way. It shows a certain way that art can intervene in the society. But the work does not take a position in relation to the content of Islam as a religion. It focuses on ones right to express ones religion and culture on equal conditions in a democratic society. Our society does proclaim freedom of religion and freedom of speech. Some Muslims can see it as a blasphemous act; they see it in a non-religious context and used by a non-Muslim. This challenges their tolerance. In Bergen the press made a case of it interviewing an Imam, he said

that the Muslims don't need someone like me, a non-Muslim, to put up "their" call to prayer. So it is a challenge of the Muslims understanding of western art as well as the one of the public in general. But above all, one must say that the sound itself as an experience is beautiful, it's neither threatening nor frightening. It's not complicated. So the problematic part happens in peoples' head, in their own confrontation with differences, not in the experience. I heard someone say, someone that was passing by when the prayer call was played: What is this? Are the Muslims making a demonstration now? The first thing coming to mind when you hear something that sounds Islamic is: it is a sign of conflict. So, this shows the political polarisation we are being presented for in our time. Right now the demonising of the whole Islamic world and culture coming from the Bush-administration, the US and other Western countries is extremely strong. In order to continue an old imperialistic combat, they have made up this big lie: that fighting terrorism is the same as fighting Islam. Obviously this piece with all its simplicity touches up on the current political situation and major prejudices in our western society.

- Do you think art has to deal with things, issues, questions, that can constitute a vital issue today, as much on the anthropological, political and social level as on the aesthetic level?

I think that the aesthetics is a method: a way to welcome people in to the artwork, and that this various aesthetic methods deals with the exploration of other ways to experience and comprehend a matter. The aesthetic has no value by it self, it is always a representation of something. Everything today has a strong aesthetic dimension, a well designed visuality. What can make art different is just the things you mention, that it may deal with issues and questions that concern people in our time.

Do you assign a function to art?

I do think that art has the potential of being in active confrontation with prejudices and and lazy thinking. What is difficult is that a lot of people have prejudices towards art it self, and this stops them in communicating with a piece that is demanding and complex. They expect art to decorate their environment. The art I find important both to make and to experience myself does not give people what they want. It uses methods that opens people minds for further thinking, invites them to your party, so to say... and if they find a challenging discussion there, then it is a good party.