ONTOLOGICAL VACUUM

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ABSTRACT

My degree project has been developed through my research on the topics of originality, consumption, “vanitas” and consumer culture. It references the politics of consumption, desire, pollution, waste, the passing of time, the effect of decay, and death.

The scene is a reconstruction of a “still life” scene, referencing Baroque painting. The light-box installation comprises coloured sculptures which are emblems of consumerism. The handmade and the organic are joined in composition, as if united in ruin and decay. The sculptures resemble the still life genre and allude to memento-mori. The project also addresses the industrial food system. It emphasises efficiency, profit and power in ways that are narrowly construed, sometimes at the expense of other environmental and social values.

It consists of a glass-cast modern cornucopia. The glass captures decomposing traces and makes them solid and everlasting. Even with something so fragile and temporary as life, the material can freeze it in time. The glass captures life.

KEYWORDS

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INTRODUCTION

My artistic work practice is very diverse and bridges the realms of environmental science and cultural history. Marshalling installations and sculpture, the research often stems from fieldwork to the archive work. The focus of my work are environmental issues indicating the danger of the human impact on nature and earthlings. I believe that my objects should communicate contemporary issues such as pollution, consumption and the Anthropocene, showing both the strength and fragility of humanity.

I would describe myself as a sculptor and an artist, but craft is also a very important part in my work. Specially for this project. Process and material are integral to my work. It is also very important to me that I make my work myself. I am closely related to the objects I make, in the sense of touch, the quality of the material I am working with and the knowledge I am gaining within work. In that way, I think I am highly connected to craft tradition.

I have developed my master project through the research and archive on the topics of originality, consumption, vanitas and consumer culture. The project refers to consumption politics, desire, pollution, waste, time passing, the effect of decay and death.

The project is very material based. It consists of a glass-casted modern cornucopia. The glass captures decomposing traces and makes them solid and everlasting. Even with something so fragile and temporary as life, the material can freeze it in time. The glass captures life. It is also asking existential questions through the shape of the industrial food system. It emphasizes efficiency, profit, and power in ways that are more narrowly construed, sometimes at the expense of other environmental and social values.

I structured this paper in my own chronology. It talks about my relationship with material, process and making.
Why do I make art? For me, making art is more exciting than ordinary living.

During the process of making, time passes differently. There never seems to be enough of it. It is the most precious thing I have. Once there, I am deeply aware of time and not taking it for granted; every minute is important during the process of making in relation to making. Time has a different value and I value it more.

We arrange our lives by measuring out time in seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months and years. We celebrate the passages of time and mourn its passing. With honouring time, we struggle against our own mortality.

The pieces I have been making for this project have a strong time factor in them. The organic material which I use as a base, is short lasting and fragile. Some of the items of a still life scene were once alive and now immortalized in an everlasting material of glass offering the viewer the illusion of its ontology. At first, I found it hard to work with the concept of death, but now it’s a major focus in my work. I have also never worked with food before, so the project represents a big step for my practice.

The project title is “Ontological Vacuum”. (Image 1)

Ontology is the philosophical study of being in general. Vacuum refers to the process of making, vacuum forming. I will try to discuss my approach to these subjects.
Image 1, *Ontological Vacuum*, by Vesna Salamon, solid glass, light table, 2022
VACUUM FORMING AND STILL LIFE

I started by modelling fruit and cups in clay, but very soon I moved on by using the vacuum forming technique of casting ready-made fruit and cups. In the first phase of the making, the prototype (everyday consumption items) were vacuumed into the plastic and thus automatically became an artifact of environmental pollution (plastic is the worst in terms of quality and at the same time most problematic for our environment in terms of quantity). In retrospect, the motif is with its singularity, content and physical appearance a compression of historical and artistic meaning (as still life), and of the making process (vacuum forming). This process retroactively captures the whole group of the similar plastic progeny of our market: from plasticized tangerine slices to living plants wrapped in plastic. As a part of my method, one of the interviewed artists and a writer, Berislav Šimičić, commented, in that way, “the process disrupts any possible potential of transmedial aggregation of pollution.”¹ (Image 2).

I have been deeply thinking how to start using this horrible material in my process and what aura could it give to my work. Since I have started vacuuming food there was another dimension to think about as well: the whole food chain and the role of capitalism in the consumption politics.

¹ Šimičić Berislav, interviewed by Vesna Rohaček, Zagreb, November 20'
The fact is our food system and capitalism have co-evolved over the last 200 years. If we want to know about our food production and consumption, we have to know about capitalism. Industrial food systems emphasise efficiency, profit, and power in ways that are more narrowly construed, sometimes at the expense of other environmental and social values. We cannot change the food system in isolation from the capitalist system because they are systemically and historically connected. Just as the food system is a major contributor of greenhouse gases, for example, agriculture is one of the sectors that suffers most from global warming. Many of articles I was reading in my research process reminded me that modern agriculture was, in fact, a capitalist device.\(^2\)

I use the motif of still life as the reconstruction of my breakfast. It contains a plate with food and utensils, a cup of coffee, a box of eggs, an artistic magazine, two books, a bowl of fruit, and two house plants. My motif of a still life was the reconstruction of my dining table. The scene was reconstructed in the plastic form via the thermo vacuum-forming technique. During the making process, some forms were vacuumed from both sides. The newly made copies are still in 3D, but they are hollow, and they are just the illusion of their outer form and texture on transparent plastic. They are becoming disguised entities that are detached from the plastic mass only as the illusion of the original. (Image 3)

\(^2\) http://www.icontact-archive.com/archive?c=489666&f=60033&s=84565&m=981607&t=257c360ddc23fcec50d37942ed548ee4169a6c0d76d51e227fa886a9eced0c7

\(^3\) https://monthlyreview.org/2015/03/01/a-rational-agriculture-is-incompatible-with-capitalism/
The plastic reproductions are precise copies of the prototype’s „spirit“. In that sense, the spirit is ontologically vacuuumed. To me, this feels like it exists in the grey area. Trapped in the space of visible and invisible, life and death, original and fake. It is the illusion of the original, life size simulacra. (Image 4)

It follows the general trend of postmodernity detailed by Baudrillard. As he says, each image is a simulacrum, a perfect copy without the original. „Simulacra are copies that depict things that either had no original, or that no longer have an original. “4 The simulation of life I am referring to in this work progressed with the technical process, the mass production of objects “spirits”. The new original is lacking the connection to the real. Or at least it does not have it any more.

The original is sacrificed for the sake of its unnatural offspring and future recursive multiplication of trash. Material „still life“ is the poorest in terms of quality (plastic) and at the same time most problematic for our environment in terms of quantity. This quantity is the main lesson of the first phase of the installation.

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The focus is shifted from the intimate, personal routine (breakfast) to the group dynamics of plastics, which reflects new formal and content dispersion of previous living individual nature into the global problem.

Image 4, *Ontological Vacuum*, by Vesna Salamon, acrylic plastic, 2021
LOST WAX

In the second phase of work, the aim was to create visceral and sensual modern cornucopia made in wax after being casted from the plastic moulds. Wax has been a central material for my practice for many years. I work with wax in many different ways. I was using a lot of wax casting process in the past, for bronze or glass. So again, it is another way of exploiting the material, but also transforming it into something else. I love to work with the element of surprise in making, the chance element. The object sometimes reconstructs its shape with outsource aggression of the first technical process (Vacuum forming). Later on, the surprise element happened quite often in the process of moulding and casting with layered wax. (Image 5)

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5 a curved, hollow goat's horn or similarly shaped receptacle (such as a horn-shaped basket) that is overflowing especially with fruit and vegetables (such as gourds, ears of corn, apples, and grapes) and that is used as a decorative motif emblematic of abundance.
The items are contemporary pieces casted from the ready-made and handmade. In this phase I have also started working with animal flesh (lobsters, crabs, fish, chicken) and living plants (cactuses and “fleshy” plants, because those did not have to be sacrificed by the vacuum forming technique). I have chosen to work with processed meat for human consumption. Animals already dead and packed. The pieces I was buying would show the process of industrial food packing and preservation. Sometimes it would be cut, frozen, mechanically deformed or sold as a whole piece.

To create new sculptures, I would also sometimes start by modelling in clay, but mostly taking the ready-made items. Then I would mould and cast models with layered wax. The pieces were also melted, cut, and manipulated. This action changes the objects original meaning. As in the packing and food preserving systems. It reconstructed its shape within the process and became the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction.

(Image 6)
“THE WORK OF ART IN THE AGE OF MECHANICAL REPRODUCTION”

During the technical process of making, I started with producing negative copies in plastic moulds. Later on, I have made a couple of wax casts. Then I have built up a massive mould around one wax piece and, when it comes to the final stage of casting to glass, I have ended up having only one glass sculpture. Therefore, I am interested in the subject of originality and the possible ways of its transformation into different media.

“Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.” Walter Benjamin says the original work of art has the aura, the uniqueness which is inseparable from its being imbedded in the fabric of tradition, but the tradition itself is thoroughly alive and extremely changeable. Therefore, I believe my work creates new originality every time it changes. It reconstructs in the molecular dimension during the technical process. Since it transforms in different materials the new step becomes the new original. I believe that each item in the process: the plastic mould, the wax model and the glass model, could be seen as a separate entity. (Image 7)

Image 7, chronology of details, plastic, wax, glass, 2022

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What is original and authentic in an art object? Contemporary art is brimming with new ideas in the reconstruction of traditional art. Stanford visionary Lawrence Lessig in the documentary on copyright history The Remix Manifesto reveals about Walt Disney’s art “... his greatest work demonstrates beautifully how culture builds on the past. He takes works that were in the public domain, updates them and makes them relevant for our age. His work was always continuing the conversation of a culture. It was an expression through a remix of the stuff that went before.” People participate in the creation and recreation of a culture around us, a form of culture that has existed from the beginning of the society.

More broadly if we look at the news today as a collage of fragmented images each of which evokes even more images. „Ours is a culture of imitation “, Yves Michaud claims, „the medium is the message and the message is the medium. “9 The contemporary communication is filed with images and it is hard to indicate their authenticity. Here I can resonate with Baudrillard’s simulation of communications media and mass reproduction that was already evident and has merely progressed in the digital age. Georges Balandier claims that “a technology is not culture”. A French word mediology broadly indicates a wide-ranging method for the analysis of cultural conventional idea that technology is not culture. An interdisciplinary approach to the study of culture, created by Regis Debray in 1979, which pays specific attention to human symbolic activity and technology, especially as a medium of cultural transmission. “Prehistorian Colin Renfrew has warned that the increasing digital expression of symbolic aspects of material culture is resulting in the gradual ‘dematerialization of the real world’, meaning a future ‘archaeology of mind’ may be difficult. This ‘flood’ of electric information is no longer possible to handle other than through electronic devices.”9

But unlike the digital images which are highly reproducible and therefore lacking its authenticity, the reproduction of a solid object has different value. As The Ceramic Reader authors says, “… ceramic objects have the potential to remedy the widely observed and problematized ‘forgetfulness’ and dematerialization associated with the current age.”10 In the discussion of the object importance, Bjorn Olsen beautifully writes, that it is their ‘durability’ and ‘in-place-ness’ which situates the past within the present, providing us with the sense of ‘ontological security’. Walter Benjamin, for example, also

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7 Yves Michaud, Umjetnost u plinovitom stanju (Zagreb, Naklada Ljevak, 2004), p. 9
mentioned that Greeks had only two ways of technologically reproducing works of art: casting and stamping. Bronzes, terra cottas, and coins were the only artworks they could produce in large numbers. All others were unique and could not be technologically reproduced. That is why they had to be made for all eternity. The state of their technology compelled the Greeks to produce eternal values in their art.

I am aware that authenticity is not reproducible, nonetheless, I am interested in achieving “new originality” in the reproduction process. I believe that my reproduced object still keeps the aura and recreate the eternal value in the material of glass.

My work is evolving and transforming during each step of the cognitive and technical process. This action changes the objects original meaning. It reconstructs its shape with the reproduction methods. Its molecules are reconnecting and reshaping, and I like to keep this mark of the transformation visible. The process leaves the wax casting cut open as open wounds of the fruit bowls, showing the ephemerality of flesh and material. It is the replica that becomes the new original. (Image 8)
THE FOOD OF THE RICH AND FAMOUS

My MA project finds its roots in the still life scenes for the baroque referencing in particular with the scene “the food of the rich and famous” by Dutch painters. (Image 10)

A still life (also known by its French title, nature morte) painting is a piece that features an arrangement of inanimate objects as its subject. With origins in the middle ages and ancient Greco-Roman art, the scene emerged as a genre and professional specialization in Western painting by the late 16th century. The English term still life derives from the Dutch word stilleven while Slavic languages (as my native Croatian) tend to use terms meaning dead nature. The genre was going through a transformative evolution from the bottom of the hierarchy when not considered important enough by humanists, to the glory of Dutch Golden Age when every part of God’s creation was worth depicting. Could today, when everyone lives so fast, still life make us pause?

Image 9, Still Life with Oysters, Fish and Lobsters, made by Alexander Adriassen, 17th century
One of the big influences I have found in the work of the contemporary London based artist Rebecca Stevensons:
“Drawing on the traditions of vanitas and still life, my work explores the contradiction inherent in the “nature morte”, in which transient everyday objects – bread, meat, flowers, fruit – are immortalised and elevated by the processes of art.”

For both of us, a lot of inspiration comes from the art historical resources. The animals, food and plants are deriving from still life painting. At the first glance, a display of dead animals, fruits, flowers and books looks appealing and attractive. On the second and more detailed look, the handmade and the organic are

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11 https://www.axisweb.org/p/rebeccastevenson/#info
joined in fleshy composition, as if united in ruin and decay. The sculptures assemble the still life genre and memento mori allusion. (Image 11)

“The sculptures will occupy a liminal territory between scientific enquiry and the subjective, imaginary bodies.” The work investigates the relationship between innocence, consumption and desire. (Image 10)

![Image 11, Ontological Vacuum, by Vesna Salamon, wax, 2021](image)

The mechanical interventions in the casting process result in an outbursts of abstract shapes and textures, twisting material into forms resembling fruit, books, plants, consumer objects and animal flesh.

Wax, as an ancient sculptural medium, is related to the body and to the ephemerality of flesh. As such, it is the good medium for the vanitas concept. Glass, as the material of luxury, resembles the final *memento mori* concept on the dining table, offering its durability and reminding us of our own mortality. Both materials are mutable and fluid, and fit perfectly to the meaning of this work, as in its historical associations.

The items I am casting are: fruits, food packages, table plants and dead animals (lobsters, crabs, fish, chicken). These items are the body of consumption, transition, seriality that reflects our social values. We reproduce different *cornucopias* at our home on a daily basis. The food we purchase and consume rots, it speaks of death and dealing with the question: how did it come to our table in the first place? (Image 12)

![Image 12, *Ontological Vacuum*, by Vesna Salamon, wax, 2021](image)

With this question, the installation is bringing up capitalistic context and reflects between semantics and materiality. Food for the rich and famous is the whole food chain and the role of capitalism in the consumption politics. I like to keep the industrial food process visible in my objects. The outer layer of a
glass sculptures also keeps the decaying progress visible. The finishing method makes the sculptures look processed and in the first stage of decay (texture of the surface). (Image 13)
I would also like to bring back the element of time. Time is very relevant factor for this work. It is an important element over which we have no control. There never seems to be enough of it. It is the most precious thing we have.

Within that, I want to refer to an Urs Fischer’s recent work (Image 14), whose different wax sculptures were slowly melting away inside the Bourse de Commerce, Paris, France. The ephemeral sculptures were ignited on the first day of the exhibition and continued burning until they melted into the pools of wax by the end of the year. ‘Untitled’ is a monument to impermanence, transformation, the passage of time, metamorphosis, and creative destruction.

I also wonder if the feeling of never having enough time is connected to how we actually relate to time, and what we expect from time? We think of time as something unlimited, yet we know that it is not. We are aware of our mortality, but still forgetting it quickly. Even though we know it is limited, we live as it is not. Could this contradiction be applied to our relation to resources, food, objects, as well? Could time also be understood as a product of consumerism, a resource to consume?

I’m preserving time and life within the material. The glass captures decomposing traces and makes them solid and everlasting. Even with something so fragile and temporary as life, the material can freeze it in time. The glass captures life.
Image 14, “untitled”, Urs Fischer, 2011-2020, courtesy Galerie eva Presenhuber, Zurich
GLASS CORNUCOPIA

As I have mentioned before, in the process of making, I have started with a lot of copies in plastic. Later on, I have made a couple of wax casts. Then I have built up a massive mould around one wax piece and, when it came to the final stage of casting in glass, I have ended up having only one glass sculpture. Glass casting is the process in which glass objects are cast by directing molten glass into a mould where it solidifies. It passes through a viscous stage by cooling from a state of fluidity when hot. During the technical process of making, I have started with producing negative copies in plastic moulds. The animals, food and plants are derived from still life painting. A modern cornucopia in glass.

(Image 15)

Image 15, *Ontological Vacuum*, by Vesna Salamon, solid glass, light table, 2022
At the first glance, a display of dead animals, fruits, flowers and books look appealing and attractive. Their attractive colours and translucent details call for closer observation. (Image 16)

The colours, shapes and material quality remind us of a well-known Swedish candies from supermarkets. It is a pop art strategy based on appealing vivid colours and multiplying. The display on an aesthetically attractive table which decorations referring to baroque design remind us of high-end design stores. (Image 17)
The light from a table penetrates through the fine glass giving it a glossy shine.

But on a closer observation one has to realise what one is looking at. One is looking at the once alive animals and plants, real fruit and some other still life objects. The finishing method makes the sculptures look processed and in the first state of decay (texture of the surface). Their position on a light box makes them prominently exposed and highly vulnerable. Their innocent and fragile appearance calls for deep rethinking. It’s an appealing but highly disturbing impression. In this fusion of form the most active element is repressed: life. The once live beings are degraded to a benign and cute consumer item. This still life group looks through us by fixed and lifeless gaze which penetrates a sweet membrane of consumerism. (Image 18)
CONCLUSION

I believe that, working on this project, I have evolved a sense of respect and care for other living beings, and other humans. I also strongly believe that I have advanced my craft techniques and methods in making. With this project I am trying to show the rare possibility I was given. One of the roles we have in the field of art and craft is to discuss everything that comes with being human. I was questioning structures, things I didn’t know and things I already knew. I asked many questions, on which some of them I still don’t have the answers. Some chapters of this paper look like a stream of consciousness. But overall, I believe that today's society shows lack of empathy and understanding, and it is our role to keep reminding us of it.

Going back to research questions formulated in previous text:
Did I raise existential questions through the shape of the industrial food system? Is the project addressing capitalistic device context? The fact is our food system and capitalism have co-evolved over the last 200 years. *Food for the rich and famous* is about the whole food chain and the role of capitalism in the consumption politics.

Could time also be understood as a product of consumerism, a resource to consume?
Did everlasting material of glass offer the viewer the illusion of its ontology? Are we reminded of our own mortality? This work repressed the most active element: life. The once live beings are degraded to a benign and cute consumer item. This installation is an emblem of consumerism. The mesmerising dimension of work is a fascinating coloured material on a light setup. But the lesson should be visible as well.

How did I achieve norm-criticality? The fact that I have stepped away from everything that had to do with traditions within craft field of glass is against norms. I was using craft working methods but hopefully also made a conceptual work of art. My relationship to the material is one of the tools for reaching out the final shape which is definitely in an art sphere. The freedom I feel when using craft methods for something broader was incredible. However, I believe that the craft quality of working with glass material has given the piece the new original aura and durability, even the eternal value.

Did my object preserve its aura? Is it a new original? I hope so.

I am not quite sure whether this paper comes to any conclusions if the discussion ever comes to an end.
The Spring exhibition worked even better than expected. I wanted to encourage people to reflect on their own desires. The audience reacted the way I expected and gave useful feedbacks. They liked the displaying of lights underneath the table, the design of a table and the objects in particular. They were commenting that objects look like they are made from silicone or rubber, or even soap. The finishing layer of Vaseline that I put on objects gave them the sticky quality. So, whoever dared to touch the sculptures had a sticky marked left on their fingers, which they liked and commenting later on it helped with remembering work. The visitors also commented how they want to slice the sculptures and eat them. The temptation triggered their desires, and then we could discuss topics of marketing and consumerism. I realized I could improve the piece with more sculptures, bigger sculptures, more tables and so on. But that is a kind of next step in this journey anyway.

The examination I had in April was very useful. It was a test for my own fear of public speaking. My opponent, Michele Massuci, was well-prepared, well read and super engaged in my work and all theory around it. The discussion we created could last for another hour. He pointed out some key elements around research questions I was working on. I realized I should have investigated more about the trading
system and plastic preservation in food packaging. I am totally aware I should be digging more into that subject in the future.

Michele created rich discussion about existential questions of life, death, time, ontology, food, trading system and capitalism. I was very proud of how engaged and professional he was.

I feel more confident to continue with exhibiting this work in Stockholm’s area and beyond. Likewise, I finally reached the point where I feel proud enough to stand behind my work and talk freely about my ideas behind it. I can see this work exhibiting in Museums and galleries, but specially in a dialogue with the traditional museum displays of Still life scenes.

Museums are becoming more responsive to their audiences, and as society changes, and has changed, there is a greater recognition of the different needs and interests of audiences; audiences who want more contemporary representation within cultural institutions, or contemporary responds in a dialog with the traditional museum collection. I could offer the reinterpretation of National Museum’s collection of still life paintings. It is an opportunity to look at traditional collections with a fresh eye and explore further the multitude of possible perspectives and readings.

The Ontological Vacuum is a contemporary, glass made reinterpretation of a baroque still life painting with a consumerism critic, and I can’t wait to see it speak out loud out there.

Image 20, *Ontological Vacuum*, by Vesna Salamon, solid glass, light table, 2022
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