

Mirjam Varadinis

interviewed by Garance Massart-Blum and Milena Brendle-John

Garance Massart-Blum and Milena Brendle-John: The exhibition, *Shifting Identities* (2008), had several venues outside the museum walls. One of these venues was the Zurich airport. The site-specificity of the airport seems perfect for the subject matter of “*Shifting Identities*.” However the airport is quite a distance to Zurich. Why did you choose the airport? Were there existing exhibitions in airport environments that inspired you?

Mirjam Varadinis: *The exhibition Shifting Identities—(Swiss) Art Now* (2002) dealt with changing values and shifting identities in the course of globalization. Altogether 67 artists took part and confronted changes in the concept of identity on multiple levels: from concerns for the economic consequences of globalization, to aspects of migration and on-going cultural and religious conflicts, to investigations into the dissolution of traditional ideologies and models of belonging.

Since the exhibition was reflecting upon themes like globalization, borders and migration, it was important for me that it would expand also beyond the borders of the institution to make a shift of identity also evident on the institutional level.

I decided to occupy places of decisive significance to the identity of our contemporary society, such as Paradeplatz and Bahnhofstrasse, twin venues of Zurich’s global financial power. Zurich Airport became a satellite of the exhibition, as a symbol of transit, and a site of concentrated meditation on the issues of migration and identity. It was important for me to have artistic interventions before and after passport control – that is, both within Switzerland, and beyond it.

I didn’t want to make a classical exhibition in the airport - as there are many. On the contrary: I wanted to use the airport as a context and interfere there with artistic projects that were questioning mechanisms of control and surveillance and that

would create a moment of pause and reflection in the regular flow of the passengers. It was very important for me to break with strategies of using art to promote airports that are very common nowadays. Therefore the interventions were also mainly temporary.



GMB&MBJ: The exhibition took place in 3 locations, of which one was a private institution, one within the public space in the city of Zurich and the Zurich airport. The airport is a privately owned space but perceived by many as being public. From your curatorial perspective, does exhibition making in the airport fall under the public or private sphere notion?

MV: Airports are some of the most commercialized environments. Every little inch or cm is sold for a lot of money. So in this sense an airport is like an extreme example for what is a general tendency of the public space. Also in cities, public space is being less and less real public space, it’s owned or occupied by private companies. If you remember for example how FIFA really occupied the whole city for the European football champion ship in 2008 - that was really crazy. Certain zones that were actually public suddenly became inaccessible for people, unless they would wear certain T-Shirts or only drink a certain kind of beer etc. So one of the important questions nowadays is: Who owns the public space? And in this sense it wasn’t a big differ-

ence to curate something in the airport or in the city centre.

GMB&MBJ: *Shifting Identities* is a political discussion about breaking borders and deals with themes such as migration, inclusion/exclusion and the nomadic system. How did you go about in your choice of artists?

MV: The idea for the show came up because I realised that artists I had worked with in the last few years were dealing a lot with this issue. So it was not that I imposed a theme on the art, on the contrary, it was growing out of the art; as it was apparent in the work of many artists.

It was important to me that the exhibition would cover different approaches to the theme: From works that were touching upon political issues like migration, cultural and religious conflicts, the limits of tolerance and the idea of a multicultural society, to those works who affronted the issue on a more personal level - exemplified by the sculptures of fragmented bodies- as well as by the figure of the so often appearing doppelgänger. And the third large chapter or group was dealing with the dissolution of traditional ideologies, and models of belonging, and the parallel appearance of alternative social forms and utopias. These groups or chapters refer back to the exhibition in the museum. For the interventions in the city centre or the airport, I invited artists that were working with themes present in these specific sites: be it economic issues (for Paradeplatz) or issues of border, security and control for the airport.

GMB&MBJ: How did you approach the airport officials and how did you convince them to exhibit art - especially art with a critical political content?

MV: When the idea came up to use the airport as a site I contacted the airport and luckily got in touch with somebody who was very interested in art in general. He was the head of communication then. We met and he very much liked the idea to show art in another context, outside the museum walls. I told him very honestly about my plans and I mentioned also the idea that I intended to do things that would be critical towards certain mechanisms in the airport, and that they would also question the idea of "Swissness" which is being promoted so heartily in the Zurich airport; so to break with the image of cows, mountains and Heidi. He was very open and

willing to support the project. I was really lucky because without this man the whole project wouldn't have happened. He was also the key to enter many other doors in the airport.

Regarding the critical content of some of the works, I had some very surprising encounters: For example for the performance of Gianni Motti, *Pre-Emptive Act* (2008), we needed to work with security guards working at the airport, willing to collaborate and to do some Yoga sessions in full uniform several times a day. First I thought the head of the security company would not like this kind of critical approach towards the whole issue of "security". But again, Gianni Motti and I encountered a man who saw in this performance a possibility to react on prejudices people had in their minds when talking about security. So he supported us to find some of his employees to do the performance.

GMB&MBJ: During the process of the exhibition making did you encounter obstacles concerning political issues?

MV: No, surprisingly I didn't. I actually expected to do so, but the person from the airport I was working with was completely open. His deep conviction was that art shouldn't be censored. He said that I should have complete carte blanche, and that he wouldn't interfere in the programming. He just wanted to be informed about the planned interventions, also to be prepared if some reactions would come up due to the critical potential of some works. This guy was really amazing! He opened the doors for the project and me, to the very highest level of airport administration. Unfortunately he decided to leave Zurich airport for another job in the middle of the preparations for the show. This was really hard, because I somehow had to start again with his successor. And this person was not an art person at all. But luckily all the permissions were already organized before, and the new person in charge couldn't really skip or change something substantially. In the meantime I had also built up good connections with many other people working at the airport - on all different levels. And this helped as well as they supported me very strongly too. For example to find the security guards for Gianni Motti's *Pre-Emptive Act*, or just to bring sandwiches while inflating Aleksandra Mir's *Plane Landing* (2008) early in the morning. So in the end all of the planned works were actually also shown - which I somehow still think is a miracle, if you think of the critical potential the works had.



GMB&MBJ: Which security, administrative and political problems did you encounter while installing Aleksandra Mir's inflatable plane or with Nedko Solakov's work *A Pass-Control Story*?

MV: The two projects were both very complicated to organise – but in different ways. For Aleksandra Mir's *Plane Landing* (2008), the most difficult part was to erase all the completely irrational fears that were linked to that project. The idea to inflate a balloon in the shape of a landing airplane on the tarmac of a real airport created all kinds of dramatic imaginations in people's mind. The worst case scenario was that the balloon would explode and cause a chain reaction of explosions that would destroy the whole airport in the end. Another recurrent fear was that the inflated plane could explode, and that the remaining parts of the fabric would then stick to a cockpit of a real plane and blocks the view of the pilots and lead to an accident. So all these stories came up, although none of them were possible to happen – as Aleksandra Mir's plane is filled with Helium and this is an inert gas – it can't explode. The whole balloon is technically very sophisticated, and has been designed by the same people who had constructed Bertrand Piccard's balloon that travelled around the globe. It was a factory in England who was the most specialised place to create these kinds of balloons. So, to convince the authorities of the airport in Zurich, we arranged a meeting with the engineer of the balloon and the head of the tarmac security. The engineer explained the main technical facts and mentioned by the way that he had also worked on Piccard's balloon – of course this was a very convincing argument. After that meeting all the fears were gone and the head of security became completely enthusiastic about the project. He gave us several options where to inflate the work and we chose two locations: first, one day just outside the airport on a green field, below the real planes landing. And then on another day the plane was inflated

on the tarmac, in between real airplanes. For Aleksandra this was really a dream come true, as she had been dreaming of showing the work in a real airport for years, but never thought she would get the permit. That's the good thing of Switzerland; It's a very democratic country and if you find the right person who supports the idea it's possible to do things – without necessarily following all the hierarchical and administrative steps. That's really great! I think that's also why a project like, *Shifting Identities* was possible in Switzerland. In other countries where people follow more strictly the imposed hierarchy it would have been much more difficult.

With Nedko Solakov's work, there were other obstacles to overcome. He had the idea to use the booth of border police for his intervention – so really on the border between inside and outside Switzerland. Because once you pass the passport control you leave the country you are in, and you enter a kind of in-between zone. I liked the idea very much as it was touching very directly on the issue of borders, but I doubted that we would ever get the permission to do this. Of course I was ready to try and thus arranged a meeting with the artist and the head of airport police. We showed the head of police earlier works and interventions by Nedko Solakov and explained the concept of the show. Surprisingly he really liked the idea and in the end we got the permission to use the booth for Nedko's doodles – both Nedko and I couldn't believe it.

The doodles needed to be done when no passengers would need to pass the control. So one night we went to the airport, protected by a security guard, and Nedko drew some small doodles on every booth where people would either leave or enter Switzerland. They were funny little drawings, or sentences that should make the moment of control less severe. Nedko Solakov comes from Bulgaria, and had experienced many controls at boarders where he had felt not at ease, therefore the idea of the doodles. To be sure that the cleaning teams would not erase the drawings by mistake, we left also in every booth a note saying that this was an artistic intervention, and not vandalism. Next day we went back to check if everything was still ok and took some pictures. It all looked great and we were both super happy that it had worked out fine.

But one day later, on the day of the opening, I suddenly got a phone call from the Kantonspolizei. It was the head of press and communication, and he told me that the doodles would be removed because they would mock the police, and leave a bad impres-

sion on people visiting the country. Of course I tried to stop this cleaning action because it meant that they would destroy the artwork. But a few hours later everything was gone. Nedko Solakov was of course furious, especially because it was shortly before the opening of the exhibition, and journalists were about to visit the airport to see all the artistic interventions. So we had to come up with a new plan, and decided last minute that we will make a new work out of this failed intervention and call it *A Pass-Controlled Story* (2008), to reflect on the double control on one hand of the regular pass check, but also on the control of the authority over art. So the work consisted- in the end- of the documentation of the doodles at the airport, and a handwritten wall text in the museum explaining the behavior of the authoritative. It was a very nice work in the end which fits very well into Nedko Solakov's artistic practice, as he is often starting from mistakes or things not working properly.

But the most scary thing about the whole story was the reason behind the censorship of the police. It was all linked to the European championship of soccer taking place in Switzerland. Of course this wasn't declared officially, but many other art projects had been cancelled then as well, because they didn't fit the image that the city should have in that particular moment. An artistic intervention at Message Salon (an off space in Zurich) at Langstrasse in Kreis 4, was also censored and even followed by a juridical process. The disturbing thing about all that was that behind this image campaign stood FIFA – a private organisation, that at this moment occupied the whole city and decided what would happen in the public space and who was allowed to enter it.

GMB&MBJ: Which audience did you want to address with the installation Inflatable plane?

MV: Aleksandra Mir's work is intended to travel around the world and to be inflated in front of different landmarks or monuments to open up a new perspective and reading of the place. It deals with issues of tourism, traveling but also identities of specific places.

As I mentioned earlier we showed *Plane Landing* twice, and with the two locations also two different kinds of audiences were addressed. The first time we showed the plane on a green field just below the real planes landing. This is a place open to everybody, with no restrictions of access. It's also a

spot where airplane lovers, and spotters, gather together to look at the planes landing in Zurich. They know the schedule by heart and can tell what airline and which type of plane would land next. It's a very particular community, and we thought this would be an interesting context to show *Plane Landing*. Since the green field was next to a street, also cars would stop spontaneously to come and see what was going on. It was a mix of people and also some - although very few - art people were around. They had been informed through the website and our blog. Most people were just people from the neighborhood, which was really nice.

The second time we inflated the plane it was on the tarmac. So it was inside the airport, after passport control, and people needed to register before coming as special security measures needed to be taken. So we had again a mix of people, from curators, collectors, photographers who had registered themselves before, joined by the airport team. The nice thing was that all the people who were somehow involved in the project from the airport came and really liked it. It was an experience that left some deep traces in people's minds there, and also in their way of looking at the world. In January 2011, so 3 years later, I received an email from one of the persons who had helped organizing the project. She wrote me that she would still think of that project every day, and that it had completely changed her perspective - not only of the airport, but also on the world in general. And this is a great, great compliment!

We started to inflate the plane very early in the morning, because of the wind situation. Once daylight arrived the airport started to become alive again, also the passengers from the large central hall in the airport could see the *Plane Landing*. So it was one of the works that could be seen only by travelers that would either change their flight here in Zurich, or were about to fly off somewhere. This was one of the ideas behind the decision to show works before and after passport control: To have some works that are only accessible for people who are traveling or using the airport of Zurich as a transit site, reflecting again upon the fact that never in the history of mankind, as many people as now, have been traveling, and also in the art world people are constantly flying to all different places in the world. I heard that artists are traveling as much as managers nowadays, and curators too. I thought it's interesting to have some works only accessible for the travelers – as a kind of extra audience to the regular museum visitors.

GMB&MBJ: During the exhibition you opened a blog. Did you get any reactions from visitors/passengers to the art exhibits and performances?

MV: The idea to install a blog was important to me, as I wanted to open up the exhibition to people from outside Zurich. I wanted to use the Internet to make the show accessible from around the world – reflecting again on the idea of globalization. So all the works in the exhibition were filmed and put online so that people could “visit” the exhibition, even when physically being far away. Some works were even only present on the Internet, like Cao Fei’s *RMB City*.

We also used the Internet and blog to announce all the events happening during the whole exhibition – which was working well. But initially I thought that it would be great if people from all different places in the world could comment and exchange on the exhibition, and issues related to it via the blog we installed. But somehow this didn’t work out. Swiss people are not very active bloggers – at least back at the time of the exhibition. The idea that a Chinese blogger would react on the website, and exchange ideas or discuss specific things with other bloggers from Switzerland who had seen the show, unfortunately wasn’t working. Maybe if we had somebody really taking care of the blog by activating a discussion, it could have worked – but we didn’t have the time to do so as there were so many other things going on that needed to be organized. So the blog didn’t really work. Nevertheless I had some echoes from far away through the website. I received emails from Australia, Canada and other far remote countries referring back to the exhibition that people had seen on the Internet. Somebody from Canada even wrote her thesis on the exhibition, although she had visited the exhibition, only via the Internet.

GMB&MBJ: Now almost three years later, how would you reflect on this experience curating in an airport? Would you do it again? And if so how differently?

MV: The exhibition was a very important experience for me. I tried out several things with that show and learned a lot – on all different levels. I still think it was great and very important to extend the show to the airport when touching upon issues like shifting identities. As I mentioned earlier, the

airport is one of the central places for contemporary society and the globalized world we live in.

Looking back at the interventions in the airport, the main problem was the one of visibility. Airports are so extremely charged with visual information, that it’s not easy to compete with – especially if you don’t want to come up with monumental sculptural works. Since some of the works were only ephemeral appearances, and on view only on certain days, it must have been frustrating for some of the visitors who specially went to the airport and maybe couldn’t see the works.

But, the central idea for all the works was to interfere in a subtle way and to question the mechanisms of the airport. As I mentioned earlier, the art works should create a certain moment of break and reflection, in the usual flow of the passengers. This worked very well. Even if some of the works were maybe not visible at first sight, they left traces in a second moment - like Aleksandra Mir’s *Plane Landing*. And that’s what I intended to do.

Another good example for this is the newspaper, *Journal of Disorientation*, by Christian Vetter. It was distributed in the waiting areas at the gates, where people wait before boarding the plane. In these areas you find bookshelves where people can get magazines for free. So I wanted to place there an artwork that looked like a newspaper, but wasn’t. I liked the idea that people would take the newspaper with them to the plane, the art work, and through it the exhibition was traveling to other places in the world. I heard from some friends, who didn’t know about Christian Vetter’s work, that they did as I described: They were waiting and bored, so they looked at the magazines to find something to read, took the newspaper, started to look at it and were confused a bit first – then they realized that it was an art work and took a whole bunch with them to distribute to their friends in the country where they were flying to.

So to sum all this up: I’m very happy with the overall experience of that show, and I would definitely use the airport again when doing an exhibition dealing with issues that are related, or present in the airport. But it needs to have this background. Otherwise I wouldn’t be interested in just doing an exhibition in the airport that wouldn’t have a conceptual link with the site itself.

Captions

1 Aleksandra Mir, *Plane Landing*, 6th July 10-18hrs Installed in: Berlet Visitor Parking, Zurich International Airport.

2 Nedko Solakov, *A pass controlled Story*, 2008, 4-5 June (erased June 5th) Installed in: Pass control Check-in 1, Zurich International Airport

Mirjam Varadinis is an art historian and a curator at Kunsthau Zürich since September 2002. There she oversees contemporary art and has organized various exhibitions, among others the group show *Shifting Identities – (Swiss) Art Now* (2008), and solo exhibitions with Haris Epaminonda, Rosa Barba, Roman Ondák, Adrian Paci, Mircea Cantor, Runa Islam, Tino Sehgal, Erik van Lieshout, Aleksandra Mir, Nedko Solakov, Urs Fischer, David Shrigley a.o.. She has published numerous catalogues and artist books.

Mirjam Varadinis was also curator of the special project *0 Performance – The Fragile Beauty of Crisis* for the 5th Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art. In 2012 she co-curated *TRACK*, a large-scale, city-wide international group exhibition in Ghent. In 2006 Mirjam Varadinis was the curator of “*Printemps de Septembre*”, an annual festival of contemporary arts in Toulouse (France). Additionally Mirjam Varadinis is part of various international juries, a.o. the *Skoda Art Prize* in New Delhi 2013

Garance Massart-Blum is one of the two founding members of massart brendle art curating and advising. Garance was born into the art world as the daughter of a renowned auctioneer and impressionist and modern art expert. She has gathered experiences in large museums and galleries for contemporary and classical modern art. Throughout her life, she has fostered excellent relations with the most important galleries, foundations, and art collectors worldwide, while developing collections for clients. Before establishing massart brendle art curating and advising, she worked for nearly a decade as an art consultant and independent curator in Europe and in the Middle East. Garance has a double Bachelor’s Degree of arts in: *History of Art and International Relations* from Tufts University, Medford MA, USA where she received a distinction for her dissertation. She also holds a Postgraduate Master of Advanced Studies Degree (MAS) in Art Curating from Zurich University of the Arts (ZHDK).

Milena Brendle-John is one of the two founding members of massart brendle art curating & advising. Over the past years she has been in charge of a major private Swiss art collection and has worked as an independent art consultant and curator in Europe. Her career began in an international gallery with a focus on Classical Modern Art. Later she worked for several years as an art evaluator/consultant for a major art insurance company. There she advised clients in the private, institutional, and commercial sector regarding questions of: insurance coverage, evaluation, inventory, collection support, conservation, and transport. Milena has a Master’s Degree in History of Art and Psychology from Ludwig-Maximilian-University in Munich, Germany, and a Postgraduate Master of Advanced Studies Degree (MAS) in Art Curating from Zurich University of the Arts (ZHDK).