

**Janez Janša**

*SS-XXX / Die Frau Helga. The Borghild Project Reconstruction*

“if it happened only once it's as if it never happened.”

ARTHUR ZMIJEWSKI

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In his essay *History Will Repeat Itself*, Inke Arns asserts that our increasingly mediated experience of the world is one of the reasons for the recent success of re-enactment. In the words of Arns, “History appears to be present at all the times and in all places; at the same time, however, this permanent availability of media representation renders all forms of authenticity increasingly remote.”<sup>1</sup> This leads to the need to ‘update’ events – be they historic or recent – that exist only in mediated form.

Arns describes this as a transition “from representation to embodiment”<sup>2</sup>, and observes that it is based on an unresolved contradiction: on one hand it eliminates the distance between us and the images, while on the other it distances itself from the mediated image; it removes the filter of the media (and of time) in an attempt to recover the original dimension.

To quote Steve Rushton<sup>3</sup>, all re-enactment (or, more generally, all practices of reconstruction) is connected to the “mediation of memory”, an expression which beautifully encapsulates both the mediatory role of memory and the impact of the media on it.

The relationship between these four poles (the event, its reconstruction, media and memory) becomes even more complicated if we take account of various other factors which are by no means secondary. In the first place it is significant that all reconstructions, including those more strictly related to performance art, make considerable use of the media, not only in the (posthumous) stage of circulation in the artistic circuit, but also at the stage of what Arns would call the *embodiment*.

This can be seen in a few examples which have become classics, from *The Battle of Orgreave* by Jeremy Deller to *The Third Memory* by Pierre Huyghe, to *Auditions for a Revolution* by Irina Botea. In other words, even the *embodiment*, as it occurs, becomes a representation. Secondly, in their works many artists seem more interested in underlining how the mediation brings the original work ‘up to date’, than rediscovering an alleged “original event”. This is also in view of the fact that the latter exists only in virtue of the traces it has left – written, iconographic and material traces. As historians and lawyers well know, the distinction between actual and probable is extremely subtle, and, as *The Third Memory* demonstrates so well, if even the protagonist of an event, when reconstructing that event, cannot help looking to the way it has been reconstructed by others, we can safely say that it is all but impossible to bypass the media, and the mediatory role of memory.

In line with this concept, some artists have tried to break free from the bonds that tie reconstructions to the past. In this case “reconstructing” does not mean recouping an original event in the present, but “building again” on the fragile foundations offered by memory – gathering its media fortune and actively contributing to it, combining actual and probable, historiography and imagination, truth and interpretation. These reconstructions do not rely on any sense of loyalty to the past, because they are aware that the past comes to us irremediably manipulated; rather, they attempt to explore our faith in the ‘proof’ offered by objects and the media image.

*Greenwich Degree Zero* (2006), by Rod Dickinson and Tom McCarthy, is perhaps the most emblematic example of this. The artists reconstructed an event that never occurred (the fire in Greenwich Observatory that would have resulted from an unsuccessful arson attack by an anarchist in 1894), creating fake but probable documentation of the event. The term re-enactment is deceptive: *Greenwich Degree Zero* is an example of media falsification. It does not reconstruct the past, but intends to demonstrate how malleable it is.

*SS-XXX / Die Frau Helga. The Borghild Project Reconstruction* (2007) is on the same wavelength. The work started life as a news item, which did the rounds in 2005, and was reported on as authentic by various esteemed newspapers, from the Spanish *Clarín* to the German *Der Spiegel* to the Italian *Corriere della Sera*. The story, which appeared on the German site borghild.de<sup>4</sup>, with many details, (most of) which can be verified, regards the work carried out by a team of Nazi scientists, from 1941 onwards, on the creation of the first sex doll in the history of humanity. This was designed to satisfy the comprehensible sexual urges of German soldiers at war, while avoiding the unpleasant health risks connected to frequenting brothels. It quickly transpired that the story was a hoax, artfully created by a (still anonymous) author.

In particular it was noted that Norbert Lenz, the name behind the borghild.de site, described as “a freelance-journalist contributing regularly to magazines like *Stern*, *Max* and *Focus*” appeared to be entirely unknown to the editorial staff of the magazines in question, and while much of the circumstantial evidence can be easily verified, some of the main characters involved appear to be unknown to history, and the documents mentioned impossible to trace. Yet all of this merely shed doubt on the *Borghild Project*: while there is no proof in its favour, we also lack the proof that it is definitely a hoax. Whatever the truth of the matter, the *Borghild Project* is one of history’s black holes. It continues to live on, above all on the net, and while some are hard at work to debunk it, others are working equally hard to enrich it with new details. As Einstein said, theory determines what we observe, in history as well as science, and the theory at the basis of the *Borghild Project* is a most

interesting one indeed. In one project it offers the chance to explore the probative power of a media fragment; the scientific and technological innovations developed by the Third Reich, and some significant ideological implications regarding the theory of racial purity.

20 November 1940<sup>5</sup>: in a letter, Heinrich Himmler, commander of the SS, observes the “unnecessary losses” among his troops caused by the prostitutes of Paris. Out of the search for a solution to this problem comes *Borghild*, a top secret project under the responsibility of Himmler himself. The project is developed as of 1941 at the Deutsches Hygiene-Museum in Dresden, under the supervision of Franz Tschackert, an engineer who rose to fame in 1935, for his *Woman of Glass*.

The latter – a suggestive glass mannequin which reveals the skeleton and blood vessels – was exhibited for the first time at the exhibition *The Miracle of Life*, which was organised by the museum with the patronage of the Nazis.

The sex doll dreamt up by Himmler, destined to follow the troops into enemy terrain, presented some additional challenges, as noted by Rudolf Chargeheimer, a psychiatrist involved in the project. In order to be preferable to a real woman, the doll had to fulfill certain quality standards: her synthetic flesh had to be very similar to real flesh; her body as flexible as a real one; her sexual organs were to seem entirely realistic, and above all, her appearance had to correspond to the soldiers’ expectations.

The German chemical industry had already proved its ability to produce high quality skin-like polymers, so the labs set about working on the doll’s appearance. Himmler wanted to create a model of Aryan beauty, and to this end various real-life models were taken into consideration: athletes like Wilhelmina von Bremen, or actresses like Kristina Söderbaum. But the developers soon began to realize that there was no such thing as an “ideal” woman, and that the best thing to do would be to create the doll in a modular fashion, using the best part of each female model. The face was also a significant problem. The Danish doctor Olen Hannusen, Himmler’s right hand man on the project, observed that sex was the doll’s only purpose, and that it should in no way become “a substitute for the honourable mother at home”; its face should be an “artificial face of lust”, reproducing a “common wanton’s face”. Chargeheimer also agreed that “the idea of beauty harboured by the SS might not be shared by the majority of our soldiers”, and that “the vulgar could appeal to most ordinary men”.

The creation of the face was entrusted to a sculptor, Arthur Rink. Pupil of the famed Arno Breker (1900 – 1991), Hitler’s favourite sculptor, Rink – who had worked at the Hygiene Museum since 1937 – created 10 models for the doll’s face, which were then assessed in psychological tests. Three models of

different appearances and sizes were then implemented. According to Rink, called on as the only living witness to the *Borghild Project*, the first to enter production was model B: 176 cm tall, corresponding to the “Nordic Type”, with small, easy to grasp breasts, and a blonde bob. The presentation of the prototype in Berlin was a success, and Himmler immediately ordered 50 dolls. But the war was taking a turn for the worse, and at the beginning of 1942 the project was interrupted. All the material records of the project appear to have been lost in February 1945, during the bombing of Dresden, which did not spare the Deutsches Hygiene-Museum.

Regardless of its authenticity, the modern day success of the *Borghild Project*, and the very fact that someone decided to dig it up (or, more probably, invent it from scratch), reveals the lasting appeal of Nazi history, and the problems that Germany – and the rest of the world – has in coming to terms with it. How much of our current technology is indebted to research performed by German industry between 1933 and 1945? As an erotic model has the “Nordic type” disappeared altogether, or is it still present in the fantasies of millions of internauts, attracted by the proliferation of porn from North East Europe, and the model of the current silicone sex dolls? Have we overcome the trauma of Nazism, or does it actually still return to haunt many contemporary issues?

**Janez Janša’s** reconstruction appears to be principally interested in these aspects of the project. The work appears to explore three parallel strands: “updating” the project using objects found or created as needed; “verifying its authenticity” by means of historic research and documentary proof, and “implementing” it by means of new details. It is significant that all of these approaches have been explored by those – journalists or enthusiasts – who picked up on the story.

For example, on 26 June 2005, *Clarin* reported some details which did not appear in the original source, such as the desire to preserve the purity of the Aryan race, and the fact that the doll would be carried in each soldier’s pack: “The idea was that each soldier would carry a doll in his rucksack, along with the rest of the necessities vital for survival.”<sup>6</sup> There appears to be a substantial amount of interpretation of the source material each time the story is told, even by journalists, who should by rights be as objective as possible.

In line with this Janez Janša, who explores the story in installation form, gives a face to those involved. He scoured antiques markets looking for historic images and documents attesting to the existence of various research projects, such as that into synthetic flesh, and that into Ipolex, one of the materials investigated for the production of the doll. He found a face for “Helga” in an elegant art deco

ornament; and developed Lenz's allusions to the life-like genitals and the research into the doll's synthetic voice, in a direction which is unpredictable, but still consistent with the project. For the installation he created a "military" gadget with a sexual orifice, which, when stimulated by the visitor, activates the doll's voice: the sound of a perfect orgasm that concludes with the forbidden verses of the German national anthem, the emblem of Germany's inability to come to terms with its past. As we know, the anthem – which was written in 1841 by August Heinrich Hoffmann von Fallersleben and set to music by Joseph Haydn – is now played minus the first two verses. Singing those verses represents an "apologia of Nazism". As it is easy to surmise, this is due less to its origins or literal meaning, and more to its history. *Das Lied der Deutschen* started life as a patriotic song and became the official anthem of the German republic in 1919. From 1933 to 1945 only the first verse was used, with its famed intro, "Deutschland, Deutschland über alles". When it was written this stood for the supremacy of the nation concept, but under the Nazi regime it ended up symbolising the supremacy of Germany over the rest of the world<sup>7</sup>. The result is that one of the most important countries in the European Union now has a truncated national anthem, due to what could be described as a successful re-enactment. *Die Frau Helga* twists the knife in this wound, and like all the work by the Neue Slovenische Kunst (which Janez Janša would undoubtedly have in mind at this stage) sees the "re-actualization of the trauma" as the only way to get over it. At the same time *Die Frau Helga* highlights the power of all acts of re-appropriation, a strategy that, on an artistic level too, must be tackled with great care. Janša works with the ambiguities of re-enactments, reconstructions, re-appropriations and the like, playing on the common Latin root of the words tradition and betrayal (*tradere*, meaning to hand over, pass on, transmit). The story hinges on this ambiguity, due to the fact that the original event, though well documented, has been lost for ever. Or, in the words of Arthur Zmijewski: "if it happened only once it's as if it never happened."<sup>8</sup>

## **Domenico Quaranta**

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Translated from Italian by Anna Carruthers

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<sup>1</sup> Inke Arns, “History Will Repeat Itself”, in Inke Arns, Gabriele Horn (eds), *History Will Repeat Itself. Strategies of re-enactment in contemporary (media) art and performance*, exhibition catalogue, Hartware MedienKunstVerein, Dortmund and KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin 2007. P. 43

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. pp. 59 – 60.

<sup>3</sup> Steve Rushton, “Tweedledum and Tweedledee resolved to have a battle (Preface One)”, in Anke Bagma, Steve Rushton, Florian Wüst (eds), *Experience Memory Re-enactment*, Piet Zwart Institute 2005, pp. 5 – 12.

<sup>4</sup> [www.borghild.de](http://www.borghild.de)

<sup>5</sup> The quotes and contents that follow all refer to: Norbert Lenz, “The Borghild-project – a discreet matter of the III Reich”, 2005, available online at <http://www.borghild.de/indexe.htm>

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in *Janez Janša. SS-XXX / Die Frau Helga*, a pamphlet produced on 29/11/2007 on occasion of the exhibition at the Galerija Nova, Zagreb.

<sup>7</sup> For more information, see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Das\\_Lied\\_der\\_Deutschen](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Das_Lied_der_Deutschen)

<sup>8</sup> This quote was used as the name of an exhibition in 2005 at the Kunsthalle Basel; quoted in Arns 2005, p. 63.