



On Travel, Tourism, Art and Authenticity.

Nika Spalinger in Conversation with Barnaby Drabble, 2005

BD: You initiated Travel-Agency three years ago. Can you describe what this project is about?

NS: *Travel-Agency* offers a particular travelling experience -the journeys take only about twenty minutes. To date the service has been offered in the context of galleries or museums, but it could be offered in almost any other context. You have recently been on a tour with *Travel-Agency*. How would you describe your experience?

BD: *I am still recovering from the wellness-tour I chose. You sat me in a comfortable chair, asked me to close my eyes and then in a soft voice talked me through an imagined holiday in which I got to make decisions about where I went. I described to you, as I made these decisions, what I was seeing and experiencing, the colours, smells, people that I met, buildings that I encountered and the activities, which took place. As I took the tour I was interested in your role as a tour guide, although I got to make decisions you directed, to a certain extent, the framework of this experience. What were your reasons for doing that?*

NS: There are different reasons. On one hand I need to set a time-frame adapted to the given situation, on the other hand I feel responsible for making the journey comfortable for all the participants, as the tour guide I help with a good departure and safe return. Basically you need someone to talk to you in order to keep you awake while you observe these images floating in you mind, since this state of mind is extremely relaxing. As a tour guide I can make proposals, but it's you who decides at every moment what you want to experience and to look at.

BD: Personally as an artist you said you see your work as a form of research. For the project in Amsterdam you have chosen to offer three kinds of holiday: pilgrimage, adventure and wellness-tours. In comparison to an adventure holiday or a wellness-break, pilgrimage seems a fairly specialist and rather outdated idea. Why did you choose this religiously loaded holiday as one of your three on offer?

NS: I think you cannot really say pilgrimage is something outdated – just remember all these young people travelling to Köln recently to see the new pope- they were on a religious journey for example!

BD: Why does that interest you, this connection between travelling and an idea of finding or reinforcing belief?

NS: In tourism, like in religious practice there are lots of unconscious rules. The elements that inform a journey might be comparable to the elements that a ritual is made up of. I am trying to figure out what specific forms and images inform a journey and I'm experimenting with these forms in *Travel-Agency*.

BD: Why are you so fascinated by tourism?

NS: Art and Tourism have a lot in common. They are unnecessary but very important for the projection of dreams, hopes and longings. They allow us to escape our everyday-life, to live new experiences, away from home and from the people that know us to well, we can play a new role, live aspects of our personality that are normally hidden or suppressed, be a queen amidst servants, a sexy hot-shot, a religious fanatic, a gangster. This is all about role-playing. The tourist plays a role but the hosts as well: The tourist plays the tourist and the hosts play the role of "the alhorn playing Swiss " or "the sensual Thai". The relationship of society with art and artists is quite similar to that with Tourism. Authenticity and originality are keywords used to describe the artist's personality, and society wants to see them live a certain life, one as exotic as any south-pacific indigenous person, a life as a journey outside any norms and rules.

BD: I'm interested in this idea of mutually creating an imagined authenticity. This is a very interesting way of talking about tourism as kind of joint theatre. This obviously also has transgressive and utopian possibilities and I believe different communities coming together imagining the authentic is quite interesting in relation to what I am doing in the arts. There is a parallel here between an idea of a physical journey and the idea of a dream or a story. (cut away the following question does that work out?)

Moving on to another topic, I wanted to discuss the relationship between the photographic image and tourism. I think that the photograph plays a sort of pivotal role in the process in tourism, between the presentation of idealised imagery in the tour brochure, and the replication of these images by the tourist on holiday. It seems there is the wish to bring home images, which are as idealized and perfect as the ones that attracted you to go away in the first place. There is almost an erosion of the idea of being away through this act of documenting and observing these images. The trip almost cancels itself out.

NS: I believe that an image or lets say *sight* stands at the beginning of every journey. The *Travel-Agency* project is full of images, ones that the brain recollects and constructs from memories of real experiences and pictures we have seen in the media. The emotional and representative value of these images is always important. I recently collaborated with a neuro-scientist on a project, and during this time I learned, that there is an area in our brain that is responsible for recognizing places we already know and also, that the fact of seeing an image repeatedly makes you like it more than others. That might explain the importance of replicating images of tourist attractions – comparing, recognizing and repeating the image seen so often on postcards, in the media or elsewhere gives us a positive, reassuring feeling.

BD: *That's interesting, because in the tour you have just guided me on the places I found myself in were all familiar to me, at the time perhaps not consciously so, but afterwards it was clear that one was my parent's house, another a village in Greece from a recent holiday, and another a place I particularly like here in Zurich. Given your thesis, it is perhaps unsurprising that with the suggestion of a comfortable 'wellness' holiday, the brain chooses to throw up familiar places for one to visit*

NS: What is also a very central part of travelling is the preparation. It is the phase in which we kind of define the rules of our journey. The biggest difference between travelling as a tourist or travelling as a migrant is that as a tourist, you will always return. The journey is usually exactly defined in time and space, and this notion is very important for the wellbeing of the tourist. Like in a game, where the limits of all the actions are defined by rules, we are allowed to go to the limits of this frame, but no further. Indeed, the existence of this frame governs the way people behave, as they dare to do things on their journey they would not normally allow themselves to do.

BD: *Whether travelling free or taking a very tightly organized tour it seems that there is always the lie of the unexpected, a willed creation of a false authenticity, something you crave but at the same time you insure yourself against. On this issue of authenticity I have a proposition and a question. Mass-tourism is frequently, and on the face of it quite correctly, reported as an unbelievably destructive form of human activity. In addition to ecological damage, the main accusation is one of a kind of cultural brutality, and the idea, tourists in general are not interested in experiencing the 'real culture' of the places they visit. Their surface-interest in the places they visit, can be seen as an insult to the people who live there, and as tour operators start to employ people to cater to exactly this cosmetic experience, tourism can be seen as a direct form of cultural exploitation. I'm suspicious of understanding tourism in these purely negative terms because I think it presupposes that places are or were once 'authentic' and I question whether a place ever has an 'authentic' moment which is not in its very nature hybrid, changing, adapting or evolving. So, to come to my question, which is at the heart of this issue of heritage. Can we ever perceive culture as static, complete or authentic?*

NS: I think it is so difficult nowadays with everything changing so fast to find such an orientation, or define such a moment. In my research I am exploring the structures that might lead to a kind of tourism that could be positive for the tourists as well as for their hosts. The central question is: What kind of setting allows a real cultural exchange between tourists and their hosts? Currently I am exploring two beliefs, the first is about control: I believe that on holiday, people tend to behave the way they are expected to. The second is about authenticity: here I believe that you only become aware of your own culture, when you compare it with another. These ideas of how our experiences are framed and the mirroring nature of this search for authenticity are hugely important with mass-tourism growing as it is, because more and more people are asking themselves the question: What is authentic in my own

culture? And this leads to the question: who or what is framing this experience for me?

With *Travel-Agency*, I also like to show, in a low-tech way, that it is very easy to produce images and to travel without any expenses, by simply sitting in a chair. Only few people realize that their brain produces pictures all the time and that under certain conditions, you can watch these. I offer a situation where people can observe their own imagination. It's that simple!



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Solo Exhibitions (selection): 2001 "Cache parmi les feuilles", Video-Installation with Shelly Silver (NY) in the Museum of art and history in Fribourg (CH); 2002 "watching & talking ", Video- installation, Platform, Vaasa (FI); 2004 „Travel Agency“ ParaSite, Contemporary Art Space Hong Kong.

Group Exhibitions (selection): 2001 "Larger than life", Bunkier Sztuki, Krakau (P); "Impacts-tour" in: Festival International du Belluard BBI, Fribourg (CH) 2001; "IN MOTION2", Festival of International performing and visual arts, CCCB, Barcelona (E), Festival "la batie", Geneva (CH) 2002; in Festival V.E.O., Valencia (E) 2003; "The new Agora", Citadellarte, Biella (I) 2002; "the bourgeois show", Dunkers Kulturhus, Helsingborg (SE); 2004 „I need you“, PasquArt Bienne (CH); 2005 „Science et Cité - lets cerebrate“, Villa Bernasconi Genève (CH); „Handluggage 2005“, Cafe-Gallery Projects, London (GB); „Xenopolis“, Rathausgalerie, München (D); 2006 "Global Tour", W139 Amsterdam