

Althea Thauberger, The State of the Situation

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**ART GALLERY OF NOVA SCOTIA
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Vancouver-based artist Althea Thauberger makes photographic and video works that examine how institutional communities (in the shape of institutions, governments and other agents of society) circumscribe public action, and how publics (in the shape of collaborative communities) can counteract the centralizing forces at play in any cultural structure. Through her critical approach to documentary methods, she creates unique interventions into history and works collaboratively with diverse communities to help them create their own expressions of their historical moments.

The State of the Situation, on view at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia (AGNS), is part of the artist's first retrospective, which will be shown in three different iterations in Vancouver, Lethbridge and Halifax. The AGNS component of the project features five works: two photo-based projects, one dual-screen installation, and two digital films. The oldest work in the exhibition dates from 2006 while the newest is from 2018, providing a comprehensive look at Thauberger's practice. The works also reflect the two dominant streams of her work: institutional critique and collaborative story-telling.

Zivildienst ≠ Kunstprojekt (Social Services ≠ Art Project), from 2006, was the result of a collaboration between Thauberger and a group of eight young German men in Berlin. In Germany at the time, "Zivildienst" was a program in which conscripted persons who were conscientious objectors could work on social improvement projects rather than serve in the military. Thauberger, who was in Berlin on an artist's residency with the Künstlerhaus Bethanien, worked for three-and-half months with one group of conscripts to develop a narrative video using theatrical improv techniques. The resulting work, a moody black-and-white postapocalyptic narrative, is set in a nearly empty building. The entire drama plays out on a multi-level set of scaffolding. Without dialogue

Althea Thauberger, *The State of the Situation*, 2019. Partial installation view. Photo: Steve Farmer.



(the only sounds are made by the movements of the actors) or props, the actors nonetheless tell a story of individualism, factionalism, conflict and reconciliation in the face of outside threats. Featuring intermittent text frames that set the stage for the drama (like the panels in silent films), the viewer is drawn along in the video to its hopeful conclusion. As is standard in Thauberger's work, the protagonists were not professional actors, and their amateur state added a compelling level of naivete and innocence to it. Thauberger returned to this strategy in the digital film *Mad Mad Mad Mad Filmy World (Pagal Pagal Pagal Pagal Filmy Dunya)* of 2017. This work, created for the Inaugural International Karachi Biennale, was filmed in the Saddar neighbourhood of Karachi. Its setting, the Capri Cinema, has been a central feature of the neighbourhood since its opening in 1968. In 2012, protestors burned the cinema while a riot was set off by a controversial YouTube video. Since restored, the Capri Cinema's staff, owners and patrons worked with Thauberger to create a portrait of the building and a narrative of its central role in their community life. A series of improv interventions were staged and filmed in the cinema's lobbies and interviews were conducted in the theatre itself. This mixture of fiction and fact (as much as storytelling is ever fact), addressed the site and its content, from the perspectives of its users and animators. Thauberger, as filmmaker, provided a context for the conversations, but did not determine the direction or the outcome.

By relinquishing the role of author, and substituting the collaborative process, Thauberger keeps her work open to unforeseen possibilities. But in the exhibition's third filmic work, the two-channel video installation *L'arbre est dans ses feuilles* (2017), she reasserts her authorial voice to examine narrative as it is used in nationalist story-telling. She is also the primary actor in this work, although her collaborative impulse continues with the involvement of four young Montreal poets: Danica Evinger, Natasha Kanapé Fontaine, Kama La Mackerel and Chloé Savoie-Bernard.

The work is based in part on a popular section of the Canada Pavilion at Expo 67, an installation called "The People Tree." Derived from photographs at the National Film Board's Stills Division, the "People Tree" purported to show Canadians a portrait of themselves, in all their diversity. The systemic classism, racism and sexism of the times, however, is apparent in many of the labels affixed to this well-meaning archive. One, showing an "undesirable situation" in Gaspé, goes on to describe the scene this way: "Photo shows a poverty stricken little girl and little boy with their mother in their sordid home." The labels consistently describe women in terms of their attractiveness (a bank clerk is "pretty," not "efficient"), and subjects are identified racially and ethnically in terms that, while common enough in mid-60s Canada, grate on 21st century sensibilities.

The National Film Board's Stills Division was run by a woman named Lorraine Althea Monk. In addition to "The People Tree" Monk also oversaw many book projects developed from the photographic archives of the NFB. Also on view in the exhibition is the related series of large photographs *Althea Lorraine (Index, Card; Index, Nose; Index Leaf)* that show Thauberger dressed as Monk, working at a desk. The background is a virtual wallpaper of the labels and comments from the backs of the photographs.

In *L'arbre est dans ses feuilles*, Thauberger also portrays Monk, usually seen

at a desk, handling—in a very mannered way—stacks of photographs. The soundtrack features poetry as well as excerpts from Monk's writing and internal correspondence from the Stills Division. Prose written by cultural historians Andrea Kunard and Carl Payne is also interspersed throughout the soundtrack. Thauberger's actions are presented in front of an ever-changing slideshow of images from the stills archive. First seen sitting, posing, following off-screen directions, and then "working," Thauberger's Monk becomes increasingly less rational as the video unfolds, eventually standing on top of the table attempting to balance on a precarious stack of photographs.

The doomed balancing act represented by the nationalist conceit of Expo 67 and, specifically, "The People Tree" project, with its intention of portraying the citizens of Canada in "all their racial and ethnic variety," is here made physical. Her own collaborative approach is both a critique of top down 'nation-building' and a means forward. In the contrast between the criticality of *L'arbre est dans ses feuilles* and the optimism of the other projects, we see that what she is documenting is the creation of communities—in a movie theatre in Karachi, a building under renovation in Berlin, an airport in Kandahar, and maybe, hopefully, in an art gallery in Nova Scotia.

Ray Cronin is a Nova Scotia-based writer and editor. He is the founding curator of the Sobey Art Award, and former Director and CEO of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia. He is the author of numerous catalogue essays, articles for Canadian and American art magazines, and is editor-in-chief of *Billie: Visual Culture Atlantic*. Cronin is sole author of nine books, including: *Gerald Ferguson: Thinking of Painting* (2018), *John Greer: Hard Thought* (2019) and *Mary Pratt: Life & Work* (2020).