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Untitled (Travel in a Box)

Lala Raščić

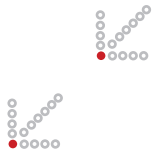
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a journal for critical writing about works
from the Horsecross permanent collection
of contemporary art at Threshold artspace



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artspace



Threshold artspace launched in September 2005 in Perth, UK. It is home to Scotland's only permanent collection of contemporary media art with 60 works acquired over 2 years. The artspace covers a number of project spaces available for artists' interventions including an entrance box for interactive soundscapes; a 'canvas' of 22 flat screens dominating the artspace for multi-channel video art installations; an interactive playground for art games and live internet art; a trail of sound boxes and sensors embedded in the floor and ceiling; an audio visual treat in the public toilets; copper-clad roof for light artists. All Threshold artspace locations are linked together by 'intelligent' software which allows artworks to be displayed through curated exhibitions and experienced 24 hours a day throughout the year.

Horsecross is an independent arts agency delivering cultural, conference and community activity in Perth Concert Hall and Perth Theatre. Located within the foyer of Perth Concert Hall Threshold artspace sits on the site of the original Horsecross, Perth's 17th century horse market. The name is synonymous with bustling activity in the heart of the city. The development of the £19.5m Perth Concert Hall and Threshold artspace was a Millennium project and is part of the area's economic development strategy to position Perth as one of Europe's most vibrant small cities by 2010.

Horsecross aims to put this part of central Scotland firmly on the cultural map both nationally and internationally.



The essays *Playing With Parallels. A Smashup Tale of Two Journeys* by Timothy A. Weeks and *Which Way is Up?* by November Paynter were commissioned and published on the occasion of the commissioning, production and acquisition of Lala Raščić work *Untitled (Travel in a Box)* (2008) for the Horsecross permanent collection of contemporary art and its public premiere in April 2008 as part of the artist's first public gallery exhibition in Scotland included in the *Bon Voyage* summer exhibition at the Threshold artspace.

Untitled (Travel in a Box) (2008) was developed while Lala Raščić was an artist-in-residence during the Edinburgh Art Festival 2007. The commission was produced by the artist and Horsecross for Threshold artspace in partnership with 55degrees and ARC Projects. Supported by the Scottish Arts Council Lottery Fund and Croatian Ministry of Culture.

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Playing With Parallels A Smashup Tale of Two Journeys

Timothy A. Weeks

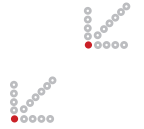
Correspondences of forms, according to art historian Kaja Silverman, are at the heart of the aesthetic of modernity. For Bosnian artist Lala Raščić, recognizing these irrational linkages – the echoes and resonances of events in time and memory – and framing them into works has become an ongoing theme for exploration. Latent in previous works such as *The Invisibles* (2005), Lala Raščić's intrigue with correspondences has recently pushed to the forefront, as evidenced by the title of her exhibition last year in Sarajevo's National Art Gallery of Bosnia and Herzegovina *Everything is Connected*.

With *Untitled (Travel in Box)* (2008), created as a site-specific multi-channel installation for the Threshold Artspace in Perth, Scotland, both Raščić's intrigue with correspondences and their consequences intensifies. Even the work itself was conceived as a result of serendipity. The influence of chance, fortune or fate on art is a notion as romantic as it is mysterious (and thus unquantifiable), yet serendipity is nevertheless compelling when experienced firsthand. Raščić was traveling with me last summer as I toured several southern states in the US, storytelling at public libraries from my latest children's book, which she had helped to design. For the opening part of the programme in Fairhope, Alabama, a librarian read author Ellen Levine's *Henry's Freedom Box* to the 100-plus children in attendance. Levin's illustrated tale recounts the historical travails of Henry Box Brown, an African American slave who shipped himself to freedom in a box from the southern slave state of Virginia to the non-slave state of Pennsylvania in 1849.

Such literary efforts, targeting children, to right the wrongs of history by owning up to ignoble aspects of the past are very much a part of the confessional culture of contemporary America. And controversial, for remembrance and education are sticky, political, divisive subjects. Every heritage comes with baggage; to grow up in the South is to grow up with the legacy of slavery. Although 2007 marked the 200th anniversary of the abolition of slavery in the United Kingdom – it took a savage Civil War (1861-1865) and 600,000 casualties before it was made illegal in the South (1865).

And despite great strides to eradicate racism and promote the technicolour myth of America, life in the South is still largely perceived and professed in black and white, with no patience for grey subtleties and nuance. The figure of Henry Box Brown thus creates ambivalence in the white Southerner's soul, evoking either self-loathing or denial (or both), making it difficult for many to hear Levine's tale without hearing an agenda.

Hearing the tale without this cacophonous accompaniment of guilt and politics, Raščić was fascinated by Levine's tale of Brown's journey in a box, and fascinated further with its correlation with the foolhardy trip of Charles McKinley in 2003. McKinley, also an African American, was a Bronx warehouse worker who gained brief notoriety for mailing himself to his parents home in a crate from New York City to Dallas, Texas, during a four-week holiday. For Raščić, McKinley's foolish escapade was now not merely another senseless random event filling the tabloids, but an odd echo of Brown's journey (though with a notable reversal in direction – McKinley escaped from a northern state to a southern state).



Untitled (travel in a box)



Unburdened by local history or politics, Raščić began to play with the parallels of Brown and McKinley, focusing on the similarities of their journeys, their motives (escape) and method of movement (mailed in a box). Several weeks later I was also on hand when this incubating idea was greeted by more serendipity, when Raščić visited the Threshold artspace at the beginning of her Perth residency and discovered it a natural fit for representing these journeys. The narrative of their harrowing escapes could be visually told across the 22 horizontal monitors. Untitled (Travel in Box) emerged with Raščić blackfacing herself in minstrel style and being filmed tumbling inside a box as it travels – a visual reference to the Tim Pope-directed video for Close to Me by The Cure, in which the band are cramped in a wardrobe that topples off the edge of a cliff.

Yet such a correlation would have remained undeveloped if not for the fortune of Raščić's ethnic background. Because of slavery's lingering legacy and creeping political correctness, artistic commentary on race (except for the most apologetic) by a white-faced artist is taboo, as is the once-popular 19th century practice of blackfacing for minstrel shows. No US artist (nor European artist with colonial backgrounds) would have such levity at their disposal to play with the parallel tales of Brown and McKinley. Naivety of social mores allowed a foreigner such as Raščić the freedom to explore human idiosyncrasies without concern for taboo or censure.

Seen tumbling across the 22-monitors of the Threshold artspace, Untitled (Travel in Box) visually evokes a minstrel road-trip romp. Flippant and free of any political tones, the work – packing all the correspondences claustrophobically together in one box – explores the personal sensations of the twin journeys rather than their social implications. The result is a smashup tale of two journeys: one a departure, the other a return. Both desperate, but one gesture heroic, the other harebrained. One revealing the absurdity of a society, the other indicating the idiocy of an individual.

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Which Way is Up?

November Paynter

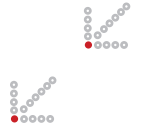


One hundred and fifty years, as well as circumstance, separates the stories of Henry 'Box' Brown and Charles 'Box' McKinley, yet the respective acts they undertook to travel from one place to another, which led to their fame, are surprisingly similar. In 1849 the young slave boy Henry Brown mailed himself to freedom, travelling undetected for 27 hours all the way from Virginia to Philadelphia. More recently in 2003 a homesick Charles McKinley shipped himself to his parents home to save the cost of an airplane seat. He covered 1500 miles, travelling from New York to Dallas only to be discovered at his destination by the local delivery man. Both men spent their time in transit curled up in a foetal position inside a shipping box of limited proportions and for their unusual choice of transport both later received the nickname: 'box'.

Artist Lala Raščić often searches out such characters and reincarnates them in her art works where they come to life again via her personally adapted versions of their original stories. Raščić's works often take on the form of audio dramas or performances, in which she narrates different roles on behalf of each of her chosen cast members. For example, in an earlier work *Sorry, Wrong Number* (2006) (1) Raščić interprets a famous audio drama from the 1940s. The main storyline follows an invalid woman who spends all of her days in her room at home; her only link to the outside world being the telephone. One night she receives an incorrect connection and overhears a plan for a murder. While she is desperately trying to warn the police, she realises that she has listened-in on the plan for her own murder. The distortion of reality present in this story is mimicked in Raščić's resulting installation where the audio track, which is a recording of Raščić playing out her version of the drama on stage into a microphone, and the accompanying projection of her images, only synchronise for brief moments.

This seemingly technical mistake evokes the nostalgia of early black and white television broadcasting. When the image and sound do occasionally sync-up the resulting coincidence seems uncanny, as it becomes evident that the distorted voices do in fact belong to the performer. This shifting in and out of the simultaneity of the sound matching up with the image comments on the impossibility of communication and refers to isolation.

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Which Way is Up?



Raščić's installation *Untitled (Travel in a Box)* that was premiered in 2008 at Threshold artspace in Perth uses similar devices to *Sorry, Wrong Number* in that it both resurrects and amplifies the intensity of the stories of Henry 'Box' Brown and Charles 'Box' McKinley. Referring perhaps to Brown's post-box abolitionist exhibition panorama titled *Mirror of Slavery*, the installation *Untitled (Travel in a Box)* comprises a panoramic chain of screens, each one presenting a different close-up angle of Raščić's re-enactment of being contained in a box. The screens dictate the parameters of an imagined box and the visuals are again in black and white with Raščić's face barely lit by the light of her phone, another historical reference this time to the phone that McKinley was said to carry with him throughout his journey. The rest of the artist's body is left in the dark to be imagined by the audience in a crushed and curled up state. A sweeping view of this panorama encompasses a series of interior images of the box seen right-side-up, upside-down, mirrored and enlarged to reveal only Raščić's face, giving the impression of the box's tumbling movements. In the centre of these fluctuating perspectives is a single still image of Raščić's portrait with her face masked by black ink. The theatricality of this image blurs the boundary between the official stories and Raščić's version, it also acts to combine the three protagonists – Brown, McKinley and Raščić into one and the same character. Her mask refers to the 'box' travellers mode of disguising, their anonymity while in transit, the need for silence while hidden and also to the puppet-like undertaking of such an odd act.

In a similar way to *Sorry, Wrong Number*, the sound and image in *Untitled (Travel in a Box)* again appear disjointed. Multiple views show Raščić reading the same script and yet her voice is fractured and uncertain as she struggles to make-out the printed words in the dark. Her hesitancy describes the mood of her characters' experience, their confusion about time and place during their journey that Raščić pinpoints as being 'where nowhere is'. Her rambling narrative attempts to imagine the mental dialogue going through Brown and McKinley's heads, as well as adding her own take on how such an experience would feel and unfold.

On another screen the official stories of Brown and McKinley roll out in a similar way to the titles of a film. Again, Raščić reads the script, but this time she is not visually present and her tone is impersonal, as if the information has been found in the archives of the internet and read by a computer programme. This text is performed as the factual account that supports the fictive representation Raščić has gone on to create and acts as a platform for her more emotional involvement with the stories as seen in the panorama. It is only in this short sequence of subtitles that there is a reference to place and where the specific beginning and ending of each journey is recounted. In Raščić's version of the 'box' story, in which she implicates herself, there is no specific beginning or end point and she lets the audience imagine the time and place of her activity, or to picture her tumbling in this closed box for eternity. For Brown and McKinley, the journeys they set out on were all about the final destination, but as Raščić recites from her paper by the light of her phone, in her art work the parameters are reduced to those of the box and she lets herself become 'lost in no time, where the destination becomes unimportant'.

Notes (1) "Sorry, Wrong Number" was originally broadcast as part of the "Suspense" program on CBS in 1943. The part of Lenora Stevenson was played by Agnes Moorhead. The radio play had immense success. It ran on CBS until the 1960s and was adapted several times in Hollywood.

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