Design solves problems and art creates problems

A conversation with Biljana Popovic

by Eleanor Woodhouse

Published on 23.04.2019



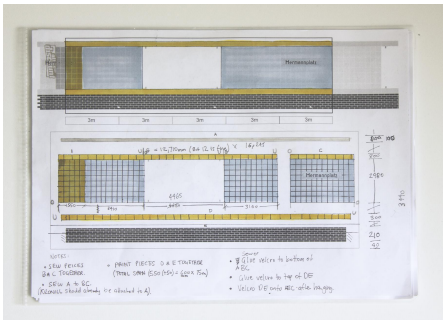
Mock up of curtain work. Image courtesy of the artist.



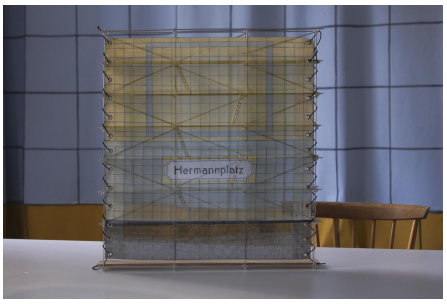
Biljana Popovic, *Synthetic Baby* installation view. Image: Mitchell Bright.



Biljana Popovic, *Niki*, 2016, strandboard, tan vinyl, stainless steel sink, automotive paint, graphic vinyl, perspex. Image courtesy of the artist.



Working drawing for Biljana Popovic's current project. Image courtesy of the artist.



Maquette of Biljana Popovic's current project as part of her residency at Künstlerhaus Bethanien in Berlin, 2019. Image courtesy of the artist.

It is difficult to define and yet easy to describe the work of artist Biljana Popovic, the current New Zealand artist in residence at the cultural centre Künstlerhaus Bethanien in Berlin. Art, architecture and interior design are all labels which can be used to explain the immersive installations, architectural interventions and strange objects she produces, and which have been exhibited across New Zealand, most recently at a solo show at The Physics Room in Christchurch. She is herself interior designer or artist, auto-didact or teacher, and she's just as likely to collaborate with car painters and public transport outfitters as with other artists. In the work that results, the history, sociology and politics of design and architecture are probed by Popovic with wit and a deeply earnest curiosity.

Popovic doesn't engage in any manipulations or contortions to achieve this feat; from her perspective, these myriad fields converse with and grasp each other plainly. Hers is a practice of revealing the connections between society, physical environment and art. For Popovic, environments are about the people who inhabit them as much as they are about any aesthetic matter. By

reframing interior design and architecture within conceptual art frameworks, Popovic offers us not only a deeper understanding of our environments, but of ourselves.

I first encountered Popovic's work via an installation she created for Gloria Knight gallery in 2014, included in the art fair Spring 1883 in Australia. In lieu of the usual booths, at this fair galleries presented their artists in the rooms of a Melbourne hotel. It was in this unusual setting that the interiors of Auckland's Link buses were directly transplanted by Popovic onto the luxury hotel interior. This re-contextualising of quotidian materials, a part of my own life that I took so much for granted, completely short-circuited my brain. In this piece, as with all of Popovic's work, there is a sense of the uncanny, but it is emptied of its characteristic angst. Instead, the effect is one of joyful discovery, and the way Popovic renders the familiar strange reveals the meanings embedded in our material environments, as well as the subconscious ways in which we relate to them, and in turn, how our environments absorb us.



Biljana Popovic, *I Don't Have to Sell My Soul / You're Already in Me*, installation view from bed, Gloria Knight Gallery, 2014. Image courtesy of the artist.



Biljana Popovic, *Fronds Fern Pattern Textile Set*, Gloria Knight Gallery, 2014. Image courtesy of the artist.



Biljana Popovic, *I Don't Have to Sell My Soul / You're Already in Me*, installation view from hall, Gloria Knight Gallery, 2014. Image courtesy of the artist.

The process by which she approaches both the world at large and her own practice is finely tuned, shaped by her experience as a commercial interior designer, and informed by an almost scientific and systematic fascination with both the physical materiality of environments, and the meaning that these material surfaces contain – and which can be revealed should one be curious enough to probe. Popovic's work speaks to the delight and curiosity that she has of the world. Walking through slanted, mirrored sliding doors, or gazing upon kitchen sinks resplendent in glossy racing-stripes, we are all children again, re-learning the visual and textural codes which comprise the physical reality of our public environments. These subversions and manipulations allow the viewer to see what Popovic perceives naturally, yet idiosyncratically. Her immersive installations and off-kilter props are the means through which Popovic translates the world for the viewer, providing a privileged route to access her own revelations.



Biljana Popovic, *Morgana Rise*, 2016, mixed media. Image courtesy of the artist.



Biljana Popovic, *Niki*, 2016, strandboard, tan vinyl, stainless steel sink, automotive paint, graphic vinyl, perspex. Image courtesy of the artist.



Biljana Popovic, *Electra*, 2016, strandboard, midnight blue leather, stainless steel sink, automotive paint, graphic vinyl, perspex. Image courtesy of the artist.



Biljana Popovic, *Untitled*, 2016, towel rail, automotive paint, graphic vinyl, perspex. Image courtesy of the artist.

Popovic now lives in Berlin where, since October 2018, she has been the recipient of the 12-month Creative New Zealand Visual Arts Residency at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien. From her studio, Popovic has been researching the design and socio-political histories embedded in the underground stations of Berlin's public transport network, the U-Bahn.

I talked to Popovic about her background in commercial design, her artistic process and many influences, and several events she is working towards during her residency. Next month she will be having a solo exhibition at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien where she will present new work alongside a series of public program events. The exhibition will include a multi-media installation in the format of a performative lecture which journeys through the aesthetically

diverse stations of the U-Bahn, reading their interiors as texts, and examining their histories.

ELEANOR WOODHOUSE After graduating from Elam in 2012 you worked for a time as an interior designer at Jasmax, a large architecture and design firm in New Zealand. Where do you draw the boundaries between working as an artist and working as a designer?

BILJANA POPOVIC I draw the line between contexts. When you're working as a designer it's a totally different context than when you're working as an artist. Your work is meeting entirely different needs. I like to state it as a joke: "design solves problems and art creates problems." When I'm making art, it's always an open ended process. I don't have an image of what I'm going to make. I don't write a brief for myself and then try and fulfil the brief. It's more like an adventure where the direction of the project becomes more and more articulated as it takes shape. Whereas with design, you can't just take off without a clear goal – you need to know exactly what you need to deliver. There are these things called "deliverables" and you need to know exactly what they are, exactly when they're coming in, exactly how to prioritise them and what order to work in. It's much more regimented. The creative side of design is very interesting but when you're working as a commercial designer there are more or less tried and true methodologies that we tend to use. I'm not saying that the ideas are the same every time, but the way that we work has a pattern. That's true for some artists as well. But I would say that at this stage in my art practice, I'm all about developing and extending these methodologies.

I think it's very good to be mindful of which context you're working in. If you're using too many art-context methods in the design realm, they're probably not going to work. But if they don't work in the design realm maybe they're good art methods.

EW Did your interest in interior design and architecture develop out of your work in the commercial design realm?

BP It was definitely there before I worked as a designer. I feel like I've always occupied the gap between art and architecture. There were a couple of times during art school that I wanted to switch to architecture, but when I'd go over to the architecture studios, the students would be working on drawings and maquettes, and I'd be disappointed. I wanted to see the buildings, I wanted to see the actual spaces! At art school I made the kind of spaces I had the skills to make, because I wanted to see the articulation of an idea and the entire form.

I'm also really interested in architectural history, and the socio-political context of a building. I think architecture is a really good sponge for identity as well. It doesn't produce identity so much as absorb it, I would say. Or maybe it's a two-way street… but I really enjoy thinking about architecture as this kind of backdrop or sponge for social identity.

EW You're often very explicit in stating that you work through a political lens. For example, with *Andromöeda*, the work you produced for the show Shout Whisper Wait! at Auckland Art Gallery in 2017, intersectional feminism was very present.

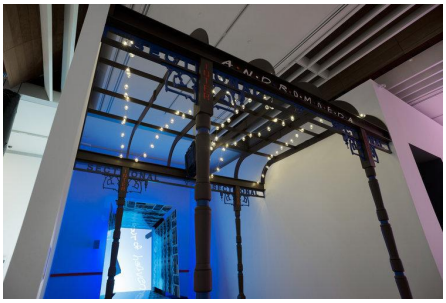
BP Very literally in fact! We have a tendency to re-write history to suit the needs of the present moment. In the 2010s there was a popular interior design trend called industrial chic, which appropriated the aesthetics of factories from the early industrial period. I think the popularity of this trend stems from a longing for a time when technology still promised to deliver us a better future. *Andromöeda* imagined an interior that was set in 2017 but from the perspective of the future, looking back. The work interprets the liminality of our time by collaging disparate materials - 90's TV graphics, Victorian heritage architecture, civil rights emblems and ancient Greek mythologies. The work cautions us against reducing history to an aesthetic reduction of a time-

period that leaves no meaningful representation of socio-political life for people living in that time. It's the responsibility of artists to consider their own intersections.

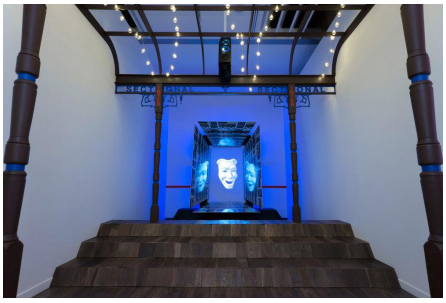
EW So not taking for granted the fact that you should be considering these political perspectives?

BP Right, so it's a matter of personal responsibility. Traditionally the architecture world and the world of academia, and many other institutions, have been dominated by hetero-, patriarchal, white perspectives. When I'm reading and researching I often think "what is missing here?" In order to find the ideas that really inspire me in this domain, I've had to literally use these keywords, and ask: what does a feminist architecture look like? How do architectural historians explore their intersections through writing about and making buildings?

Andromöeda was a bit tongue-in-cheek and uneasy, because it's a projection of the future, and what future institutions could look like. It was about imagining new ways in which we can design cultural institutions and it was like a micro version of an institution in its own right.



Biljana Popovic, *Andromöeda*, 2017, graphic vinyl on Paylite, laser-cut timber, MDF, custom-turned veranda posts, stained cedar roof shingles, vinyl flooring and LED lighting.



Biljana Popovic, *Andromöeda* 2017, graphic vinyl on Paylite, laser-cut timber, MDF, custom-turned veranda posts, stained cedar roof shingles, vinyl flooring and LED lighting.

EW It seems like you've got these complex ideas, but you're trying to communicate them as clearly as possible. This

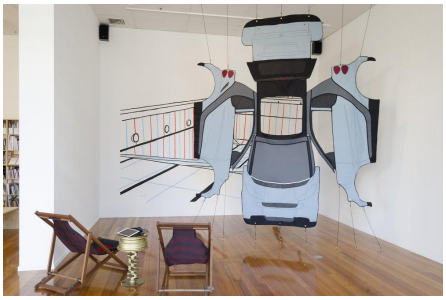
approach almost feels adapted from commercial design methods - it's not reductive, but lucid.

BP Yes.

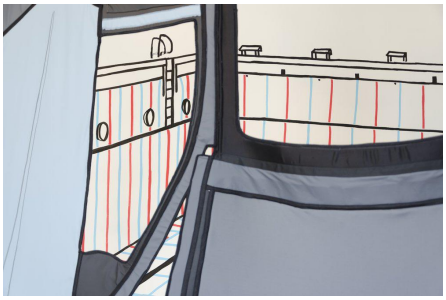
EW Along with architecture and interior design, your work has often engaged with public transport. Why this particular interest?

BP Well, it's not just public transport, I'm interested in private transport as well – for example, my show at The Physics Room evolved from the "skin" of a smart car. Following *Andromöed a*, I was describing the work I was making for Synthetic Baby (The Physics Room show), and someone said to me "it seems like you're taking a different direction." And I thought, how is this a different direction? For me, the passion for both of these things come from the same place.

When I was 18, I had this *obsession* with 1960s American design. At that time there was a fixation on the space race, and the idea of houses as machines for living, and in 1968, *2001: a Space Odyssey* came out, and there was a fascination with spaceship interiors. I was into this architecture firm called Superflex, and the Italian industrial and interior designer Joe Colombo. They were almost imagining how to make an interior for living that uses the same logic as the interior of the aeroplane. Theirs was a type of design that blends interior design or architecture with product design. And my interest with all of this was not just with supermodernity as such, but with the optimism that has been attached to it – the feeling that living with technology is going to enhance your life. And I'm interested with the flip side of that as well, all of the ways in which technology fails us.



Biljana Popovic, *Synthetic Baby* installation view. Image: Mitchell Bright.



Biljana Popovic, *Synthetic Baby* installation view. Image: Mitchell Bright.



Biljana Popovic, *Smarthide* detail. Image: Mitchell Bright.

EW Materiality is a key concern in your work, how does this relate to transport?

BP Touch is really, really, really important to my work. Touch is the mother of the senses. And public transport, aeroplanes, cars and all of these kinds of interiors, are all so fascinating from a sensory perspective, in a way that architecture just isn't. They have their own micro-sociologies going on, they activate all of these different parts of the body. The haptic sense, and muscle memory, and – especially in Berlin – the olfactory sense! That's very interesting to me.

EW The work you've been producing during this residency is centred around Berlin's underground train network, the U-Bahn. Can you tell me how you came to focus on it?

BP At first when I got to Berlin I felt like an outsider. It felt like I didn't know what I was doing, I'd just learnt how to use a train and go in the right direction –

EW — I think this is an experience many New Zealanders going overseas for the first time are very familiar with!

BP – yeah. And I had this feeling… that almost everybody on the train knew that I wasn't meant to be there, and that I stood out. Of course in reality nobody cared, no one was

looking at me, but this feeling… I couldn't shake it. But then! We would arrive at these stations, and they were just so spectacular, I wanted to get out at every single one. They were such a distraction from this bad feeling that I thought, whatever this feeling is, it's so worth it to get to these stations. Immediately, I was in love.

Being underground was a world of different sensations. It felt very separate from life above ground, in the beginning. I could see there was a lot of history, and I wanted to read these stations like texts. But I didn't just want to do a tour by one of those classic historians who just give you the facts, "this station was built in the year blah blah blah and it is such-and-such long." You have to do a lot of work to read between the lines, and there are many gaps in the information. The gaps are so crucial to me, but you can't find writing about them anywhere. So you work with them, in them, through them.

The stations are places where people hang out. There's a whole culture of the underground train, which is specific to Berlin's specific social-cultural makeup. And there's also a generalised train-riding culture, which can be observed in other cities with underground train networks. It's definitely a lot more at-ease than the feeling of being at an airport with a whole bunch of strangers. There are all these different social groups in the U-Bahn, and for the most part, people are being very tolerant of one another. And so I had this feeling that the U-Bahn is like the living room of democracy – this is what democracy looks like! It sounds trite and it sounds naïve, but this was the feeling I was met with when I moved here.

EW You will be using the U-Bahn as both the setting for and subject of a film that blends documentary with theatricality, in which a performer/lecturer examines the histories embedded in its stations. Are you re-framing the stations as a kind of theatre or stage-set?

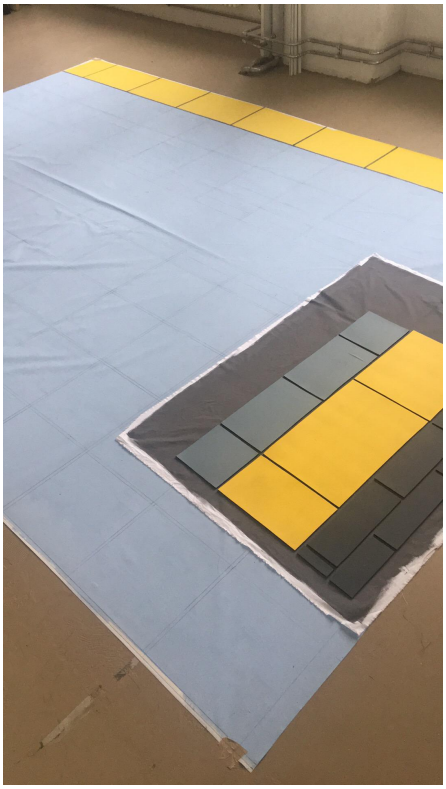
BP I'm not thinking of my work as a play but as a "performative lecture," which is different – the basis is a lecture, and not theatre. I will only have one main prop – which is a

decorative curtain, a 1:1 reproduction of the tiled walls of the Hermannplatz U-Bahn station. The curtain becomes this kind of soft façade backdrop for the lecture, which will start in Hermannplatz, covering its peculiar histories, but then depart to unexpected destinations. It's something between a backdrop and a piece of decoration. Depending on what the speaker is talking about, it can take on one meaning or another. It's a very flexible prop.

In the work that I did at The Physics Room, I said I was making a prop opera (although since the main actor was dancing rather than singing, it was more like a prop-ballet). Thinking about the objects I make as props is really interesting to me. Sometimes they're props, sometimes they're décor. They're very slippery things.



Hermannplatz U-Bahn station, Berlin. Image courtesy of the artist.



Working design for curtain. Image courtesy of the artist.



Hermannplatz U7 Line - Fabric work test. Image courtesy of the artist.



Hermannplatz U8 facade wall. Image courtesy of the artist.

EW I've always felt that you could have easily become an educator as much as an artist or designer. What are your thoughts on the artist-as-research and artist-as-teacher? Are these roles artists can or should occupy?

BP I wouldn't say artists "should" be teachers. But I think they can be teachers. Lots of people that I've encountered during the research for this project have been amateurs, in the sense that they aren't working within traditional institutions. And I love amateurism! It brings its own beautiful energy. And with this performative lecture format, I get to play with what it means to be an expert on a subject.

EW Your work is informed by so much research, but you never hold this close to your chest. The fruits of your research are communicated clearly through the work to the audience, which is very generous. That you're creating a performative lecture for your next project really speaks to this aspect of your practice.

BP The idea to use a lecture format came from a few different places. I started going to this event called Berlin Spoken Word, and again, I was thrilled to find myself in a community of mostly amature writers. Anyone can go and just get up to perform a poem, or a song, or some kind of reading. They get up in front of this room of strangers, and everyone's so encouraging, it's like doing karaoke at Charlie's on K' road in Auckland. When I go to those kinds of events, I'm confronted by the literal power of the voice. It's really beautiful, it's so simple but there are so many different things you can do with it.

Making this new work I was also thinking about the architect Katarina Bonnevier. With her thesis "Behind Straight Curtains" she turned the thesis format into a play. The way she uses the voice in that piece is really interesting. It goes between an academic tone and a very heartfelt, funny character. The fact that she said to herself "Ok I'm writing a play, I'm not just writing a thesis" gave her a lot of license to do things that you literally cannot do in real life. The play jumps through time, it's a door which takes you to a different dimension… that's amazing to me, and you can do it if you decide to make something theatrical.

But going back to my lecture… you have to think "what am I giving to the audience?" Making art is weird, you have to be selfish and generous at the same time. You have to create work for yourself,

definitely, but you can't just do it for yourself. If your art brings together all the things you love, like a personal, special little thing of yours, that's great, but how are you giving the audience access to the subject that interests you?

Biographies



Biljana Popovic is a New Zealand artist and interior designer, and the 2018 recipient of the Creative New Zealand Visual Arts Berlin Residency. She works across sculpture, installation, and, more recently, film. Recent exhibitions include: *Sirens*, Mirage, Auckland (2016); *Shout Whisper Wail!*, Auckland Art Gallery Toi O Tamaki (2017); *Thing Persuasions*, Veronica Gallery, Amsterdam (2018); and *Synthetic Baby*, The Physics Room, Christchurch (2018).



Eleanor Woodhouse is an arts writer interested in moving-image practices. She received an MA in Media Studies from the University of Auckland in 2017 and lives and works in London.

HUM

creativenz
Arts Council of New Zealand Toi Aotearoa