

Buying The Museum

Robert Stasinski*

Some of the most interesting artworks of recent decades have by and large ushered in a critique toward conventional art forms, but most of all the convention of the art institution itself. Artist Andrea Fraser has described the intimacy of institutionally critical artworks and their hosting institutions as a move toward an *institution of critique*. The institution acts as the proving ground for the artwork as well as the backdrop of political, social and aesthetic critique. The institution gets their subversive artistic project and the artist gets to openly criticize the institutional framework in a seemingly win-win situation. So, do bite the hand that feeds you.

It is not strange then that artist Alessandra Di Pisa in her latest work *Buying The Museum* takes a shot at the very core of the art institution, but this time from a perspective seldom pursued by artists when she aimed at buying the actual institution, thus totally shifting the power relations. The work started in 2007 in Switzerland at the Migros Museum in Zurich, when she was commissioned to produce a new piece for a solo presentation in the fall of 2009. Di Pisa formed a public company named *Bugaboo*, with herself as the 51% majority owner. It was supposed to be a platform for a number of artistic and economic interventions produced in conjunction with the museum leading up to her show in 2009. The company *Bugaboo* was managed on behalf of the shareholders by a board of directors, comprised mostly of art historians and economists. As an initial part of the project Di Pisa asked the Migros Museum to symbolically give *Bugaboo* 1% of the ownership of the museum. Although it was a symbolic document, it was legally binding. The museum complied.

The shares of *Bugaboo* was from 3 December 2007 distributed and sold via the Zurich stock exchange for the symbolic sum of 0,01 Swiss franc per share. A lot of people bought them, mostly for fun after a large advert was posted in *Kunstforum*, one of the most important art magazines in the German-speaking world. Any expected revenue of *Bugaboo* would according to the advert be financing the project for her solo show at The Migros Museum. But in late 2008 Di Pisa increased the value of the company *Bugaboo* by selling half of all shares to *TNK-BP Ltd.* - the mother company of The Migros Museum. On 5 January 2009, Di Pisa maneuvered an economic adviser at the *TNK-BP Ltd.* to symbolically sign over 1000 shares in order for *Bugaboo* to get liquidity - a 50-50 split between *Bugaboo* and *TNK-BP Ltd.* and thus legally Di Pisa became the CEO and the majority shareholder of the Migros Museum.

On 9 January 2009 the law firm connected to The Migros Museum alerted the director Heike Munder of the proceedings who immediately demanded that Di Pisa resigned majority shareholding of *TNK-BP Ltd.* After refusing to comply, Di Pisa put out an ad in *Helvetia Zeitung*, a large newspaper in Switzerland. The ad was ironically designed with the similar typeface as the financially crashed *Bernard L. Madoff Investment Securities LLC* and in it she was stating that she would sell the shares of The Migros Museum - 51% of the shares - to use the dividend in order to open up a shelter for homeless women and a joint legal office working against trafficking in Switzerland and Italy to acknowledge these marginalized groups in Switzerland. The same day the lawyers of *TNK-BP Ltd.* filed a lawsuit against Di Pisa for breach of contract with the Migros Museum.

On Monday 12 January, Di Pisa signed over the majority share of the Migros Museum branch of *TNK-BP Ltd.* and thus ending the dispute with the Museum. Heike Munder publicly announced a few days later that the lawsuit against Di Pisa would be withdrawn. But at the same time, the museum announced that they had cancelled the planned exhibition with Di Pisa, stating: "This incident hurt our organization and its relation to its owners and members of the board. We cannot collaborate with Ms Di Pisa after this breach of trust".

Di Pisa was interviewed by BBC on January 14th stating: "My exhibition at the Migros Museum is already finished, it lasted exactly one week, the time it took for the museum to realize they had been economically and artistically overpowered by an artist in the name of institutional critique. I was using the means of economics of the artistic intervention to turn it into raw capital."

Alessandra Di Pisa made a powerful impact on the city and in many ways shook the ground of all Swiss museums, especially those working with conceptually challenging contemporary artists. For the short



duration of which Di Pisa had as much control as an entire museum board, she still merely considered the act as part of a controlled artistic experiment, to be finished and documented as both a film and a publication.

* This text is a contribution produced by Alessandra Di Pisa, written by Robert Stasinski.