# Negotiations

## Daniela Kostova and Olivia Robinson

## Introduction

*Negotiations*, by Daniela Kostova and Olivia Robinson, explores issues of cross-cultural communication using readily available digital effects and surveillance technologies. Over two years, the artists developed an interactive performance system consisting of two connected costumes, one blue (the "Alien") and containing a hidden point-of-view camera, the other black (the "Authority") and carrying a visible camera. From the Authority's perspective the body of the Alien is replaced via blue screening techniques with the Alien's point-of-view, in real-time. The system has been performed in three public environments: Sardinia, Italy; New York City, USA; and Sofia, Bulgaria. In each performance, the Alien's hand-held monitor, which displays the "negotiated" video in real time, becomes a focal point for the formation of relationships between the spectators and the performers. This, combined with the costumes' conspicuousness, fosters the development of a site-specific story with recurring themes, including estrangement and integration; cultural economics of "authority"; flexibility of law, territory and ownership; and mediation of experience.

During performances, locals would stare as the system passed. The distinctive blue suit and authority costume exemplified the tourist, the alien, the exotic, the military, the Other - no matter the city. A familiar scenario emerged: an actual "authority" figure would approach the system and aggressively ask about the use of technology within his/her territory. The Alien would show the hand-held screen displaying the live manipulation of the blue screening process in effort to excuse our presence, while the Authority continued focusing the camera on the Alien, engrossed in her job documenting every interaction of the Alien. The screen thus became a bridge between the system and the unknown environment. The process it displayed, both familiar because of its use in movies and yet unfamiliar in the context of the street, allowed us to be seen as slightly magical oddities (rather than sharply intrusive) and thus less threatening. As the Alien struggles to gain minimal trust and invitation, the system becomes a tool for collecting stories specific to the manner in which each place presents itself to a foreign observer.

## History

*Negotiations* is based on the project Invisible Suits (2005), realized by Daniela Kostova and fashion designer Galina Kumanova. The project was informed by Daniela's experience as an immigrant living between Bulgaria and the United States and by experiments with blue screen techniques, where the blue was used as a metaphor for displacement.

For *Invisible Suits*, Galina designed two costumes out of blue screen fabric that were intended to completely cover the bodies so that they could virtually disappear in the video post-production. The effect was achieved by the use of two cameras: one mounted on the person wearing the blue suit and another one shooting her from behind. In post-production, the blue color is displaced by the footage of the first camera so that the bodies seem to merge with their visual environment.

Through this act of digital erasure, the suits became a tool for exploring issues of silence and absence, and integration and estrangement in different political and cultural environments. While drawing from theoretical concepts such as Spivak's "subaltern (1)" and the Boua's "double consciousness (2)", *Invisible Suits* also examined the tension between supposed objective and actual subjective points of view.

The *Negotiations* system was born from *Blue Suits* when Olivia Robinson introduced automating the blue screen process through developing the hardware and software technology as well as an identity for the observing character. The system became a portable unit made of readily available consumer technology, and it now physically and metaphorically tethered the observer and observed, elements that became important while performing and exploring ideas of integration, authority, and surveillance.

> ...the suits became a tool for exploring issues of silence and absence, and integration and estrangement in different political and cultural environments.

## Prototyping and Italian Police Negotiations - Nuoro, Sardinia, Italy

The prototype of the self-sufficient *Negotiations* system was first performed for the international exhibition *Boundaries* at MAN Museum in Nuoro, Italy (2006). This was the first time the costumes could perform the blue screening process live in public spaces. Although the system functioned and helped us navigate through the space, it exhibited technical and logistical problems that seemed to accentuate the stress of "cross-cultural communication." For example, some of our American power supplies failed when combined with the Italian voltages (even though we brought transformers) and the substituted Italian batteries refused to work with our American devices.

The performance happened on the streets of Nuoro where we walked in the suits with active technology. Through this performance we would explore visible and invisible boundaries within the city and the new system. In our initial concept, the Alien was the "victim" whose personal space was violated by the constant surveillance of the Authority. Through the performance, we found that the Alien was actually in control, dragging the constricted Authority by the umbilical cord-like cable that connected the two. The Authority's mission was to watch the Alien, while the Alien was free to choose her movements and interactions as long as she remained connected via the cable. The cable became a literal symbol of the confinement that an authority figure chooses to move within, and that a subject (the Alien) learns to adapt to.

Our unusual presence in Nuoro provoked emotional reactions from the locals. As they spoke in Italian or Sardinian, the Alien simply smiled back. The Authority did not smile, she remained focused on the Alien. Her behavior, together with the military costume and large video camera, appeared intimidating. We realized because we both were foreigners (Aliens) in Sardinia, neither of us understood the visual statement we might be making via the system. At the same time, we were both aware of our personal and political status in the performance: Olivia (the Authority) is from the US, a powerful and currently domineering country, and Daniela (the Alien) is from Bulgaria, a country associated with the influx of new (illegal) immigrants coming to Western Europe from the post-communist East.

Sardinia is an autonomous republic in the context of Italy, an island with its own language and parliament. At the end of our performance we were stopped by the police. It turned out they were federal Italian police stationed in Sardinia - they were alien as we were. The locals didn't appreciate their presence on the island and refused to speak with them in Italian. This story came out as we explained our performance, but after they demanded we turn off the technology and hand over our papers. We agreed on two things with the police: we both didn't understand Sardinian language, and that they were not wanted while we were only unknown. The story of this interaction was told through a single channel video incorporating images from the system and the story of the police.

## Development and Story Telling
*I Am Whatever You Want Me to Be* -
New York City, USA & Sofia, Bulgaria

*I am Whatever You Want me to Be* is a project using the Negotiations system created for the show *Between Welcome and Goodbye, Artists Positions* (2007) curated by Vladiya Mihaylova for Vaska Emanuilova (City Gallery of Sofia). It takes the form of a two interactive performances in NYC and Sofia, a culminating single

channel video, and a series of prints that unfold the story and establish the context for this piece.

As a public performance, *I am Whatever You Want Me To Be* connected two different urban realms: those of New York City (USA) and Sofia (Bulgaria) through the act of graffiti-making. Using graffiti as a metaphor for art, anti-authority culture and public space reclamation, we focused on the different positioning of graffiti artists in New York and Sofia.

While a criminalized and marginalized practice with a long history since the 70s and 80s in the US, graffiti culture gained popularity in the former communist countries during the last ten years. Soon after the communist regime was overthrown thousands graffiti paintings covered communist monuments and official buildings, representing an act of civil disobedience against the old power. They became symbols of democracy and change. Today, graffiti murals are often commissioned by the Sofia Municipality and through private advertising agencies. Our intervention aimed to explore the criminalized space of NYC graffiti and the state sanctioned graffiti of Sofia, as well as the economy and power mechanisms behind the two situations.

At least this is what we thought we were doing. Again, we were tourists in a foreign culture (graffiti), bringing with us assumptions, mythologies and an openness to the possibilities of what the system may help reveal. We decided to do graffiti in New York but were not sure how to make this happen. Driven by a tourist's curiosity and assumptions, we went to Queens, where we found graffiti covering an entire building. This negotiated space (5 Pointz in Queens) was private property (as are most walls in NYC) but with graffiti artists in charge of its surfaces. They had proposed to the building owner to become graffiti curators for its exterior and he agreed. In that strange economic realm the question arose, who benefits from this? And, whom does this art challenge? This building was the former Fun Factory that later became 5 Pointz.

> Making graffiti and comic books (the format of the print documentation supporting the performance) are practices laden with mythologies

Making graffiti and comic books (the format of the print documentation supporting the performance) are practices laden with mythologies. Raised to legendary standards, the heroic anti-authority practices of graffiti artists in NYC and Chicago can now be found regulated on private buildings or institutionalized by galleries and museums. The graffiti culture was appropriated long ago and now bridges multiple worlds - even the historic graffiti celebrity (turned gallery artist) Lady Pink

was present at 5 Pointz with a team of five assistants on the day we were there. 5 Pointz is an ever changing monument of the "free graffiti culture" controlled by one rule enforced by the graffiti artists: you must use spray. It seems that in this legal and almost encouraging environment the graffiti lost its initial birth right by having no political potency nor reclaiming public space beyond the view from the F train in Queens. At 5 Pointz, where you can paint what you want, graffiti became a beautiful decorative piece of art, on the map of must-see NYC attractions.

We suited up with live technology across the street from 5 Pointz. Immediately Meres, the graffiti magistrate of 5 Pointz, approached us to ask about our cameras. (A large painted sign on the primary wall stated that no commercial photography was allowed without permission of Meres.) After showing Meres our small screen displaying the manipulated video, he was won over. We asked to do a graffiti, he said as long as we have spray. We asked if we could hire him to wear the suit and do the graffiti for us. He gave the job to Topaz.

*I am Whatever You Want Me To Be* created an interesting situation that could be read as socially and economically emblematic of Bulgaria and the US. In both places, we paid the graffiti artist USD 150 to paint our design. In the US, Topaz painted "Welcome" below the word "Goodbye" in the colors of the American flag. "Welcome" resembled a barrier with diagonal strips in red and white. Once finished it was covered by "Goodbye" painted with gold and blue stars. By overlapping the two words they cancel each other sending a mixed message, illustrating the complex and controversial immigration politics of the US. With respect, Topaz painted per our requests, though upon our return the following weekend we found our graffiti had already been painted over.

In Sofia, we met a graffiti artist who claimed to be the "first Bulgarian graffiti artist." (He wanted to remain anonymous and used only his a-k-a, Scum.) His attitude changed the power dynamic between "employer and employee," as he established his own rules for us to follow. After finishing a wall with the word "Between" spelled in Bulgarian (as one would phonetically pronounce the English word), Scum turned to the camera and declared that he sold the Bulgarian Graffiti Culture for 150 American Dollars and showed us the finger. His statement gave the performance a different significance and revealed aspects of the experience of living within a culture that identifies itself as secondary.

Today graffiti is seen as a sign of globalization, visually unifying the world. This specific "new" culture is international and inter-cultural, offering different ways of communication without having to know a specific language or artistic history. It can also be examined in relation to a traveler's recognition of a place.

In *I Am Whatever You Want Me to Be* there are several levels of mediation, another metaphor pointing to the removal from actual experience and first hand knowledge in the technological (post-industrial) society. "Our" act of making graffiti was mediated several times: through the negotiations with Meres at 5 Pointz, through the negotiations with Vladiya Mihaylova in contacting Scum, through graffiti artists who painted the graffiti, through exchanging money, through the technology which made the performer invisible. Our experience reveals little about the action of making graffiti, though highlights a foreigners experience within the edges of both graffiti contexts.

## Conclusion
In each of the performances with the *Negotiations* system, there is a play between being seen and not seen. The performers stick out, yet ultimately the technology works to erase identities. Upon first view, the Authority seems to have all the power: she holds the only obvious camera, she is rarely herself in frame, and it is her costume that manipulates the video, which is transferred back to the Alien's monitor, reducing her to a hyper-visual "nobody." Without detail, she becomes an outline, a magnifying glass, a pattern of movements, a body incapable of taking up space.

But, as we discovered while performing the system in Nouro, the Alien wields partial control. Her self-awareness, having been placed on display by the Authority in her hand-held monitor, becomes a key to establishing relationships with curious passers-by. Or, as in the case of Topaz in New York or Scum in Sofia, the inhabitor of the Alien is not completely erased and his or her personality and agendas can still be made visible. The Alien pushes the story along, navigating society, exposing the Authority's role, spreading curiosity or voicing ideas. The Authority, bound to the Alien by an umbilicus of cable, can only observe this process, or at most slow it down. By tethering the Alien to herself, she has effectively tethered herself to the Alien. However, much as in the process of assimilation and integration, the Alien acquires this power over her surveyor at the cost of partial disappearance.

## References
[1] Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1995. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, edited by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. Routledge, NY.
[2] Du Bois, W.E.B. 1903. *The Soul of the Black Folks*. A.C. McClurg & Company, NY.
[3] Groys, Boris. 2004, "The City in the Age of Touristic Reproduction." *Art-e-Fact: Strategies of Resistance*, No 2, Zagreb.
(http://damp.nsk.hr/arhiva/vol1/1126/7327/artefact.mi2.hr/_a02/lang_en/write_groys_en.htm)