

# Sexing the Border



Sexing the Border:  
Gender, Art and New Media  
in Central and Eastern Europe

Edited by

Katarzyna Kosmala

**CAMBRIDGE  
SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

Sexing the Border:  
Gender, Art and New Media in Central and Eastern Europe,  
Edited by Katarzyna Kosmala

This book first published 2014

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2014 by Katarzyna Kosmala and contributors

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-4438-6048-4, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-6048-2

# CONTENTS

<i>List of Figures</i> .....	vii
<i>List of Plates</i> .....	xi
<i>Acknowledgments</i> .....	xiii
<i>Preface</i> .....	xv
Introduction .....	1
Politics of Gender, Video, New Media Arts and Post-Socialist Europe Katarzyna Kosmala	
<b>Part I: Crossing the Border: Histories and Frameworks</b>	
Chapter One.....	13
Double Act: Two Artists One Expression Mark Gisbourne	
Chapter Two .....	33
Moving across Europe: Three Case Studies on Sex-Appeal Beata Hock	
Chapter Three .....	55
De/constructing Balkan Masculinities: Local Tradition and Gender Representation in Video Installation Art in the Region Josip Zanki	
<b>Part II: Sexing the Border: Artistic Practice</b>	
Chapter Four.....	89
Performance Documentation, Gender and Myth in the Age of Mobile Internet Boryana Rossa	

Chapter Five .....	115
Identity Discourse in Andrzej Karmasz's Performative Acts: He May Not Seem What He Might Be Agata Rogoś	
Chapter Six .....	133
Buried Sites of Memory, Jewish Diaspora and the Other Inga Fonar Cocos	
<b>Part III: Curating the Border: Putting Politics of Gender on the Agenda in Post-Socialist Europe</b>	
Chapter Seven.....	153
New Media and Intimate Democracy: Video Art of Female Homoeroticism Paweł Leszkowicz	
Chapter Eight.....	177
Gender off the Agenda? Curating New Media Art: <i>Crossing Over</i> and <i>Desktop Icons</i> Iliyana Nedkova	
Chapter Nine.....	203
Sexing the Border, Literally? Utopian Tactics of Dealings With/out Institutions Katarzyna Kosmala	
Chapter Ten .....	231
From Feminism to Transfeminism: From Sexually Queer to Politically Queer Marina Gržinić and Aneta Stojnić	
<i>Contributors' Biographies</i> .....	253

## LIST OF FIGURES

- Figure 1.1 Komar & Melamid install their one day exhibition at the Café Blue Bird, Moscow, November, 1967. Courtesy of Vitaly Komar
- Figure 1.2 Vitaly Komar with Post-Art from Pictures of the Future series (1973-74). In the Open Door Show of non-conformist artists, Ismailowsky Park, Moscow, 1974. Courtesy of Vitaly Komar
- Figure 1.3 Komar & Melamid, *Post-Art #1 (A. Warhol)*, from *Pictures of the Future* series (1973-74). Courtesy of Vitaly Komar
- Figure 1.4 Komar & Melamid, *Paradise/Pantheon*, 1972-1973. Installation in private apartment, Moscow. Courtesy of Vitaly Komar
- Figure 1.5 Bernd and Hilla Becher, *Industrial Landscapes (Coalmine): Zeche Consolidation, Gelsenkirchen, Ruhr, Germany*, 1974. Courtesy Sonnabend Gallery, New York
- Figure 1.6 Bernd and Hilla Becher, *Cooling Towers*, 1961-1987 (2003). Courtesy Sonnabend Gallery, New York
- Figure 1.7 Bernd and Hilla Becher, *Coal Bunkers Frontal*, 2012. Courtesy Sonnabend Gallery, New York
- Figure 2.1 Judit Kele, *I am A Work of Art*, 1979. Performance. Hungarian Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest. Courtesy of the artist
- Figure 2.2 Tanja Ostojić, the 'ad'. Participatory web project *Looking for a Husband with EU Passport*, 2000-2005. Photograph: Borut Krajnc. Courtesy of the artist
- Figure 2.3 Timea Oravec, from the series *Time Lost (Nr II)*, 2007. Embroidery on textile. Courtesy of the artist
- Figure 2.4 Judit Kele, *I am A Work of Art*, 1979-1980. Installation view. Institute of Contemporary Art, Dunaújváros, Hungary, 2009. Photograph @Miklos Klotz
- Figure 3.1 Marijan Crtalić, *Living Dead (Globalization of Subconscious)*, 2006. Installation. Video still. Courtesy of HDLU Photo Archive, Zagreb
- Figure 3.2 Marijan Crtalić, *Living Dead (Globalization of Subconscious)*, 2006. Installation view. Courtesy of HDLU Photo Archive, Zagreb
- Figure 3.3 Marko Marković, *Model Suit*, 2011. Performance. Photograph @Igor Juran
- Figure 3.4 Nebojša Šerić Šoba, *Monument to the International Community*, 2007. Sarajevo. Photograph @Admir Mujkic
- Figure 3.5 Ivan Fiolić, *Bruce Lee*, Mostar. Photograph @Kristina Lenard
- Figure 3.6 Arion Asllani, *Boobs Boulevard*, 2008. Video Performance. Photograph: Ivan Petrovic. Courtesy of the artist
- Figure 3.7 Spring Bonfire by Perunova Svetinja. Courtesy of Deniver Vukelic, Perunova Svetinja

- Figure 3.8 Marina Abramović, *Rhythm 2*, 1974. Performance. Photograph: Marijan Susovski. Courtesy of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Documentation and Information Department, Zagreb
- Figure 3.9 Marina Abramović, *Rhythm 2*, 1974. Performance. Photograph: Marijan Susovski. Courtesy of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Documentation and Information Department, Zagreb
- Figure 3.10 Marina Abramović, *Rhythm 2*, 1974. Performance. Photograph: Marijan Susovski. Courtesy of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Documentation and Information Department, Zagreb
- Figure 4.1 Elena Kovylyna, *Moral Inspection*, 2004. Video still. Courtesy of the artist
- Figure 4.2 Boryana Rossa, *Blood Revenge 2*, 2008. Performance at the Red House Centre for Culture and Debate, Sofia. Photograph: Pravdoliub Ivanov. Courtesy of the artist
- Figure 4.3 Absolute Love Sect, *The End of the World Had Been Postponed*, 1996, Moscow. Performance documentation. Photograph: LiveJournal user
- Figure 4.4 Oleg Mavromatti, *Do Not Believe Your Eyes*, 2000. Performance documentation. Video still. Courtesy of the artist
- Figure 4.5 Boryana Rossa and Oleg Mavromatti, *Vitruvian Body*, 2000. Performance. Performance documentation Photograph: Jan Stradtman. Courtesy of the artists
- Figure 5.1 Andrzej Karmasz, *Celebrate*, 2013. Video still. Courtesy of the artist
- Figure 5.2 Andrzej Karmasz, *Self-portrait. Geisha*, 2003. Courtesy the artist
- Figure 5.3 Andrzej Karmasz, *Self-portrait. Woman from Akha Tribe*, 2008. Courtesy the artist
- Figure 5.4 Andrzej Karmasz, *Self-portrait. Nigerian Woman from Fulani Tribe*, 2007. Courtesy the artist
- Figure 5.5 Andrzej Karmasz, *Crystal Clear*, 2007. Courtesy the artist
- Figure 6.1 Inga Fonar Cocos, *The Other*, 2003. Courtesy the artist
- Figure 6.2 Inga Fonar Cocos, *Name*, 2009. Video stills. Courtesy of the artist
- Figure 6.3 Inga Fonar Cocos, *Name*, 2009. Video stills. Courtesy of the artist
- Figure 6.4 Inga Fonar Cocos, *Between Homelands*, 2008. Video stills. Courtesy of the artist
- Figure 6.5 Inga Fonar Cocos, *Between Homelands*, 2008. Video stills. Courtesy of the artist
- Figure 7.1 Izabella Gustowska, *Love (Rose)*, 2005. Video installation view. 'Lesbian Imagination' room in the exhibition *Ars Homo Erotica*, the National Museum, Warsaw. Photograph @Paweł Leszkowicz
- Figure 7.2 Tanja Ostojčić and Marina Gržinić, *Politics of Queer Curatorial Positions: After Rosa von Praunheim, Fassbinder and Bridge Markland* 2003, photograph and *Portrait of Two Women*, 19th C. painting (Unknown, German). 'Lesbian Imagination' room in the exhibition *Ars Homo Erotica*, the National Museum, Warsaw. Photograph @Paweł Leszkowicz
- Figure 7.3 Anna Daučíková, *Mulholland Drive*, 2003. Video stills. Courtesy of the artist



- Figure 7.4 Izabella Gustowska, *L'Amour Passion*, 2000-2001. Video installation. Courtesy the artist
- Figure 7.5 Izabella Gustowska, *L'Amour Passion*, 2000-2001. Video installation. Courtesy the artist
- Figure 8.1 Boryana Rossa, *Celebrating the Next Twinkling*, 1999. Video still. Courtesy of the artist
- Figure 8.2 YOUNG HAE CHANG HEAVY INDUSTRIES, *Artistic Statement N: 45,730944 The Perfect Artistic Website*, 2000. Video still. Courtesy of the artists
- Figure 8.3 Kristin Lucas, *5 Minute Break*, 2001. Video still. Courtesy the artist
- Figure 8.4 Matthias Müller, *Breeze*, 2000. Video still. Courtesy of the artist
- Figure 9.1 The Wyspa Institute, Gdańsk, Poland. Photograph by the author
- Figure 9.2 Katarina Zdjelar, *Don't Do it Wrong!* 2007. Video stills. Exhibition *Let's Talk about Nationalism*, KUMU, Tallinn, 2010. Courtesy of Rael Artel
- Figure 9.3 Joanna Rajkowska, *Airways*, 2008. 2-channel video installation. Video still. Exhibition *Let's Talk about Nationalism* KUMU, Tallinn, 2010. Courtesy Rael Artel
- Figure 9.4 *Public Preparation: Between Ideology and Identity, Budapest Version*, 2011. Poster. Courtesy of Rael Artel
- Figure 9.5 Marina Gržinić and Aina Smid, *Naked Freedom*, 2010. Video still. Courtesy of the artists
- Figure 9.6 Dario Azzellini and Oliver Ressler, *Comuna Under Construction*, 2010. Film 94 min. Video still. Courtesy of Oliver Ressler
- Figure 9.7 Oliver Ressler, *What is Democracy?*, 2009. 8-channel video installation. Installation view. Courtesy the artist
- Figure 9.8 Michał Szlaga, *Pixel Prostitutes*, 2011. Exhibition view. *Alternativa* 2011. Courtesy of the artist
- Figure 9.9 Jens Haaning, *Eesti*, 2010. Exhibition view. Exhibition *Let's Talk about Nationalism*, KUMU, Tallinn, 2010. Courtesy of Rael Artel
- Figure 10.1 Vlasta Delimar, *To sam ja (This is I)*, 2013. Photo negative. Courtesy the artist
- Figure 10.2 Borders of Control no. 4, *Icons of Glamour, Echoes of Death*, 1982. Video still. Courtesy the artists
- Figure 10.3 Marina Gržinić, Aina Šmid and Zvonka Simčič, *RELATIONS. 25 Years of the Lesbian group ŠKUC-LL*, 2012. Video still. Courtesy the artists
- Figure 10.4 Marina Gržinić, Aina Šmid and Zvonka Simčič, *RELATIONS. 25 Years of the Lesbian group ŠKUC-LL*, 2012. Video still. Courtesy the artists
- Figure 10.5 Siniša Ilić, *Observing the Trade (Bulk)*, 2013. Installation view. Courtesy the artist
- Figure 10.6 Siniša Ilić, *Observing the Trade (Bulk)*, 2013. Installation view. Courtesy the artist
- Figure 10.7 Lana Čmajčanin and Adela Jušić, *I Will Never Talk About War Again*, 2011. Video performance still. Courtesy the artists
- Figure 10.8 Lana Čmajčanin and Adela Jušić, *I Will Never Talk About War Again*, 2011. Video performance still. Courtesy the artists



## LIST OF PLATES

- Plate 1 Komar & Melamid, *Post-Art #1 (A. Warhol)*, from Pictures of the Future series (1973-74). Courtesy of Vitaly Komar
- Plate 2 Komar & Melamid *Paradise/Pantheon*, 1972-1973. Installation detail. Courtesy of Vitaly Komar
- Plate 3 Tanja Ostojić, *Looking for a Husband with EU Passport*, 2000-2005. Installation view. Institute of Contemporary Art, Dunaújváros, Hungary, 2009. Photograph @Miklós Klotz
- Plate 4 Marko Marković, *Model Suit*, 2011. Performance. Photograph @Igor Juran
- Plate 5 Nebojša Šerić Šoba, *Monument to the International Community*, 2007, Sarajevo. Photograph @Admir Mujkic
- Plate 6 Ivan Fiolić, *Bruce Lee*, Mostar. Photograph @Kristina Lenard
- Plate 7 Spring Bonfire by Perunova Svetinja. Courtesy of Deniver Vukelic, Perunova Svetinja
- Plate 8 Boryana Rossa and Oleg Mavromatti, *Vitruvian Body*, 2000. Performance. Performance Documentation. Photograph: Jan Stradtman. Courtesy of the artists
- Plate 9 Andrzej Karmasz, *Celebrate*, 2013. Video still. Courtesy of the artist
- Plate 10 Andrzej Karmasz, *Celebrate*, 2013. Installation view at the Wyspa Institute, 2013. Courtesy of the artist
- Plate 11 Andrzej Karmasz, *Self-portrait. Geisha II*, 2005. Courtesy of the artist
- Plate 12 Andrzej Karmasz, *Self-portrait. Yang Kuei-Fei*, 2005. Courtesy of the artist
- Plate 13 Inga Fonar Cocos, *Name*, 2009. Video stills. Courtesy of the artist
- Plate 14 Inga Fonar Cocos, *Between Homelands*, 2008. Video stills. Courtesy of the artist
- Plate 15 Inga Fonar Cocos, *Between Homelands*, 2008. Video stills. Courtesy of the artist
- Plate 16 Izabella Gustowska, *Love (Rose)*, 2005. Video installation. Courtesy of the artist
- Plate 17 Anna Daučíková, *Queen's Finger*, 1998. Video. Video stills. Courtesy of the artist
- Plate 18 Anna Daučíková, *Kissing Hour*, 1997. Video. Video stills. Courtesy of the artist
- Plate 19 Izabella Gustowska, *L'Amour Passion*, 2000-2001. Video installation. Courtesy of the artist.
- Plate 20 Lala Raščić, *17 Stories*, 2001. Video. Video stills. Courtesy the artist
- Plate 21 Kristin Lucas, *5 Minute Break*, 2001. Video still. Courtesy the artist
- Plate 22 Matthias Müller, *Breeze*, 2000. Video still. Courtesy of the artist
- Plate 23 Eva Labodkin, *Belt*, 2010. Video still. Courtesy of Rael Artel

- Plate 24 Dario Azzellini and Oliver Ressler, *Comuna Under Construction*, 2010. Film 94 min. Video still. Courtesy of Oliver Ressler.
- Plate 25 Oliver Ressler, *What is Democracy?* 2009. Film, 118 min. Video stills. Courtesy the artist
- Plate 26 Michał Szlaga, *Pixel Prostitutes*, 2011. Photomural. Detail. Courtesy the artist
- Plate 27 Rozhgar Mahmud Mustafa, *Photographs*, 2009. Photograph: Katarzyna Kosmala
- Plate 28 *Let's Talk about Nationalism!* Exhibition view featuring Tanya Muravskaya and Csaba Neme. Kumu Art Museum, Tallinn, Estonia, 2010. Courtesy Rael Artel

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am particularly grateful to all contributors, artists, writers, curators and academics who have been part of this edited collection and contributed written and/or visual material to this book. The majority of authors have contributed new texts, especially written for this book, and I appreciate their time and commitment to the project. A few chapters have also been developed from contributors' ongoing research in the area.

I would like to thank all artists whose images feature in this volume for their generosity and for permissions to reproduce their images as well as the galleries who represent the artists featuring in this book and artists' archives for in-kind contribution of images. I would like to thank John Mullen for his work on image production and invaluable comments on the edited collection.



# PREFACE

KATY DEEPWELL

This book importantly discusses sexuality in, beyond, across and within the borders of former West and former Eastern Europe. Its subject is provocative in its attention to gender, to feminism and to sexualities in relation to new media and with this attention attempts to redefine what contemporary art histories in Europe are, after the demise of Communism, and what transgression, conformity or resistance means for visual arts in changing times. The book goes beyond an ‘all that is solid melts into air’ approach, as the borders around subjects, territories, nation states and social values have shifted after the collapse of Communist regimes and new subjectivities have emerged in the current definitions of globalisation and how Europe/not Europe is conceived. The former East and West characterisation of Europe along that border formerly known as the “Iron Curtain” has dissolved and new alliances and politics have emerged in relation to Capitalism and globalisation. These new political borders have redefined different forms of European identity (into what is in and outside the EU) and, in the volume, this shift is thought against other seemingly intractable borders of media (video, web-based, digital photography, performance and installation art). The accelerated pace of workshops and new media gatherings around ISEA and the network of former Soros Centers for Contemporary Arts and their Documentation projects (now organised under Open Society Foundation and ICAN) opened up many opportunities for new media agendas from artists in the art world across the former Central and Eastern Europe, which were also highly visible to their Western counterparts in international gatherings. New institutions and new institutional frameworks emerged around contemporary art centres and projects, many led by women.

The attention to sexuality, gender and feminist theory, not reducible to sex, or one gender rather than the Other, marks this collection out as unique. Feminism is included in productive ways as a basis for praxis (organising workshops and activities by women); a tool for analysis (feminism and post-feminism); a means of exploring different subjectivities and an attention to gendered differences (feminism’s theory of gender in processes of deconstruction or reconstruction). The book

offers insight into practices and initiatives from Central and Eastern Europe which remain on the margins, and yet, offer larger clues to the greater historical and political shifts and their impact on art practices in video art. Beata Hock's analysis of Judit Kele, Tanja Ostojić and Timea Oravecz in the 2011 exhibition *Agents & Provocateurs* in Hungary or Iliyana Nedkova's *Crossing Over* project which began in Bulgaria, and the subsequent *Desktop Icons* projects demonstrate this tendency in curation. As does Katarzyna Kosmala who considers three spaces and three projects spread across East and West: *Public Preparation, Alternativa* (Wyspa, Gdansk) and *Former West* (BAK, Utrecht) as well as, in passing, *Gender Check* (2009-2010). Inga Fonar Cocos and Boryana Rossa develop an analysis through reflections upon their own practices and in relation to the work of other artists as does Marina Gržinić, and Aneta Stojnić by comparing Gržinić's own video practice with Aina Šmid and Zvonka Simčič on a history of SKUC-LL to the performances of Vlasta Delimar and videos of Siniša Ilić, Lana Čmajčanin and Adela Jušić. This involves a stark shift from the dramatization of femininity in heterosexuality of the 1970s and the 1980s to that of LGBTQ theorisation post 1988. The majority of the chapters in the book, Josip Zanki, Agata Rogoś, Paweł Leszkowicz, Mark Gisbourne and Katarzyna Kosmala offer art historical critiques of individual artists or groups of artists, adding critiques of homosexuality, masculinity and the work of "artists couples" into the mix of contributions and approaches. While Chandra Mohanty's *Feminism without Borders* underpins Kosmala's approach, the book as a whole seeks to undermine and prompt reconsideration of the borders of State and new media in Europe in contemporary art. More than the pluralism which is proposed within any consideration of difference in terms of feminisms, the book encourages a move away from a one-dimensional view of sexuality encased in heterosexual norms, highlighting different geographical locations as well as social, political, and aesthetic positions across Central and Eastern Europe.



## INTRODUCTION

# POLITICS OF GENDER, VIDEO, NEW MEDIA ARTS AND POST-SOCIALIST EUROPE

KATARZYNA KOSMALA

### **Why sexing the border?**

This edited volume investigates the video and new media art scenes of post-Socialist European contexts, encompassing geographies of Central and Eastern Europe in ways that attend to gender and feminist politics. The point of departure is a political articulation of artistic practice as well as intervention in theory within spaces of art, video and new media, and recent histories of post-Socialist Europe. The volume brings together theorists, critics, historians, curators and artists, including contributors from the region and located elsewhere, in an effort to make available a broad spectrum of perspectives for situating art production and for analysing curatorial strategies. The chapters in the volume are concerned with the technologies of media and include references to film, video and moving-image art in a more general sense as well as Web-based art practices.

Why sexing the border? What does the title imply? First, this volume addresses a geographical and political border. The region is demarcated by video and new media art scenes of post-Socialist European contexts, encompassing geographies of Central and Eastern Europe. The aim is to explore how encounters between art and technology have been implicated in the representation and analysis of gender, critically reflecting current debates and gender politics across the region. Second, there is a methodological border that needs to be considered. The book offers a diversity of analytical contexts, addressing the region's interwoven histories as well as their fragmentation, and engages the paradigms of art practice and visual cultures such histories uphold. And thirdly, there is a technological border that this volume reflects upon. In investigating how

mediating technologies have impacted the production of art, contributors to the volume are concerned with the questions of video and new media uses as well as if, when and how a 'technological turn' can be said to have facilitated an exploration and critique of gender hierarchies in the region.

The intention of the volume is also to critique a dominant art discourse that is tied predominantly to English-language area framings. The volume attempts to add to the complexity of gender positions in video and new media art histories as currently narrated in the so called 'West'. This is in acknowledgement of the fact that 'the West' may no longer demarcate a particular geography but it is a term that functions instead as a concept in a need of perpetual redefinition in the discourses where it is seen to play a dominant role. The enquiry undertaken in this volume will hopefully provide a critical angle from which to reflect on the multiple exchanges that have so far divided the territory of Europe into centres and peripheries. This is why, in terms of a historical framing, the individual chapters in the volume reflect back on a range of 'beginnings' and re-articulations, determined by the specific social conditions that enabled the rise of video and new media art across Central and Eastern Europe. The historical frameworks of this volume do not take as their starting point the collapse of Communist regimes in 1989. Instead, contributors propose to rethink and question dominant periodization of video and new media histories and practice locally or globally. For example, the opening chapter in this volume by Mark Gisbourne addresses artistic co-production conceptualised as a double act that emerged under Socialist realms. The examples of Russian avant-garde artists Komar & Melamid, German and ex-Yugoslavian artists Ulay/Abramović retrospectively and German artists Bernd and Hilla Becher discussed in this chapter demonstrate the long history between art, technology and gender that video and new media histories in the region have built on. Some chapters in the volume discuss how artists' use of new media technology played a role during a period demarcated by the socio-economic and political transition of Central and Eastern Europe to a post-Socialist cultural landscape, a transition that in some cases coincided with the significant increase or even consolidation of feminist politics in the region. Other chapters discuss art practice and curatorial strategies in the context of new Europe of today.

It is important to emphasise that the volume does *not* intend to present a survey of women's work, women's exhibitions or women's art in the region, nor proposes a common identity in terms of raised issues and responses. Instead, the individual chapters address gender in multiple ways and by drawing on various categories. Gender is theorised here as a construction, a product of various social and cultural technologies and

discourses, including institutional discourse, media discourse, epistemological framings and critical practices as well as a process of practicing gender in the everyday (Butler, 1999; Teresa de Lauretis, 1991). Individual chapters make references to female and/or male practitioners, curators and cultural workers, constructions of masculinity or femininity, hetero-sexual framing of gender, LGBT paradigms as well as queer subjectivity, resulting in blurring of gender boundaries and re-mapping of gender terrains. Feminist discourse in this volume is conceptualised as a critical theoretical context sustaining a political intervention in culture and society; a discourse that addresses and simultaneously critiques the reproduction of fixed gendered identities based on a narrow definition or bio-polar opposites, providing opportunities of resistance to normative roles and concerned with articulating the dynamics of gender hierarchies where women in particular but also certain categories of men and masculinities, sexual and other 'minorities' are registered as subordinate groups. For that reason, the contributions in the volume include mapping geographies of various versions of feminisms and feminist-inspired paradigms as well as video and new media technologies in the region. Equally, the volume is a form of critical inquiry addressing why feminist politics did *not* appear in certain contexts, or how contested notions such as 'feminism' and 'post-feminism' became possibly conflated in the discourse of artists, critics and curators working with video and new media today.

This volume brings together theoretically rigorous examinations of examples of work that had, until recently, been relegated to the margins of international video and new media art histories. Today this work becomes meaningful at the crossroads between an increasingly global and local art scene as well as regional concerns. For instance, it is worth noting that the work of Boryana Rossa, artist and contributor to the volume, became the catalogue cover image of a major US-based international show, *Global Feminisms*, in 2007. In either case, work from the region has come to rely on institutional mediation for its presentation. Artistic strategies enveloped in feminist politics discussed in the volume offer a productive perspective to reflect on the complexity of identity representation in Europe of today. An examination of the extent to which a feminist consciousness is facilitated by a turn to video and new media at the moment of its containment by institutionally-endorsed or other discourses features among the volume's distinct aims. Several chapters in the volume consider the role of curatorial initiatives in framing video and new media practice discourse in the region and in relation to the volume's main reference points, as this role cannot be assumed to necessarily replicate Western-driven patterns. Reflecting on the trajectories of curatorial practice is

therefore part of the volume's objectives in its specific engagement with video and new media art. Such critical and curatorial interventions incorporate feminist critical agendas as well as post-feminist standpoints.

Yet to the extent that post-feminism can be seen today as a historically limited response associated with the demands of 'hegemonic' art scenes in the 1990s onwards, the volume's aim is in moving the debate forward. A way of advancing this debate is realised here by considering if, and possibly how, the practices that encompass the video and new media art scenes of post-Socialist European contexts, within geographies of Central and Eastern Europe, an object of analysis in this volume, are placed vis-à-vis the socio-economic processes described as 'globalisation'.

Related to this aim is also a need to consider critically the reception of new media work in milieus that problematize the clear-cut distinction between East and West. This issue is pressing not only on account of the diverse contexts where such work circulates but also as a result of a Central and Eastern European diaspora of artists, writers and curators who often live and work both at home and abroad. Narratives of identity and gender articulations become simultaneous spaces of resistance which point out at new blurred understandings that are more hybrid in nature. These new understandings may be also blurred by processes of migrating geographically, crossing the borders and relocating permanently in some cases, as well as through the construction of new epistemologies, epistemologies born out of ways of coping with and inventing new ways to trespass the borders and living in the confinements regulated by particular cultural, sexual and controlling regimes. The volume's focus on video and new media art is precisely an outcome of the impulse to transcend borders, geographically, methodologically and technologically as much recent art now self-consciously does.

This book is intended as an original and much delayed contribution to two major trends in literature on arts and humanities and gender studies at present. Firstly, a revival of interest in feminist politics and histories, exemplified in theory and curating practice, with major shows appearing in the past decade as well as involving the art scenes of post-Socialist realms and including geographies of Central and Eastern Europe. Indicatively, it is worth mentioning the major, collectively researched project and exhibition *Gender Check*, realised in 2009-2010 in Austria and Poland, which did not however focus on the particular challenges presented by the encounters of sexual politics and technologies in regional art scenes. Secondly, we witness an intensified reframing of the socio-political and economic 'transition' of Central and Eastern Europe in light of the crisis of globalisation, as exemplified by politically-conscious

projects, such as Maria Hlavajova's *Former West* (2008-2014), Rael Artel's *Public Preparation* (2007-2012) or Aneta Szyłak's *Alternativa* in Wyspa Institute Gdańsk (2010-ongoing). These projects are discussed in greater detail in chapter 9. Finally, contributors in this volume have given a broad interpretation to questions of video, performance and new media as well as mediation in relation to art and gender, reflecting on a wide range of subjects, and proposing to include references that range from the curatorial role to artistic practice, cross-cultural collaboration, co-production, democracy and representation, impasses in securing streamlined identities - all of which further situate the volume at the heart of broader, intersecting debates.

This book is intended as a timely intervention in both critical discourses on video and new media art and gender in post-Socialist contexts. The debates they may generate are expected to intensify as socio-economic, cultural and political divisions in Europe show concrete signs of deepening. There are published works of a critical nature that are dealing either specifically with Eastern European art (e.g. IRWIN, 2006), feminism and new media or feminism and Eastern European art (e.g. Badovinac, 1999), but none bringing these practices, politics, and discourses together. The collections of essays discussing politics and deconstruction of aesthetics in Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid's collaborative practice (Gržinić and Velagić, 2008) or politics of representation in Tanja Ostojić's work (Gržinić and Ostojić, 2009) are successful attempts to position a medium of video and new media art in the political reality of Yugoslav Socialism and post-Socialist Europe. These collections could be a useful introduction to the volume's themes. Also, Aniko Imre's monograph (2009) discussing transformation of media landscape and media globalisation in post-Socialist Central and Eastern Europe although it does not address art practice as such, can be a useful background reading, and of relevance to contextualising several chapters that feature in this volume.

By documenting and reflecting upon recent histories in video and new media art from post-Socialist realms, the volume also contributes to raising political awareness. There is an urgent need to develop curatorial strategies and showcasing practices that are based on both co-operation and representation of the privileged and the marginalised, as well as to debate the intersectional nature of inclusion and exclusion by perpetuated discourse of West and East art. Simultaneously, it is important to weave in art production a long-term strategy of working with what is important for today's world, working towards eradication of various forms of sexism, homophobia and racism; in other words making art relevant politically.

## The structure of the volume

The volume is divided into three distinctive parts. Part I is entitled *Crossing the Border: Histories and Frameworks* and brings together chapters seeking to address both difference and convergence. Chapters in Part I consider the plurality of historical and cultural contexts in which technologies were introduced and informed artistic practice in different locations across the region and beyond as well as the extent to which such contexts accommodated and informed an artistic enquiry into gender relations. Contributors in this section examine either a particular cultural and social context, identified through national or regional narratives where video and new media technology have been instrumental in advancing a critique of normative gender identities (for instance, 'Balkan', 'post-Yugoslav' or 'the South East European region' as in the case of chapter 3 discussing deconstruction of Balkan masculinities through video installation art in the region) or move beyond the geographically specific concerns to posit issues within comparative frameworks of enquiry (for instance, artistic co-production is a theme discussed in chapter 1). This section addresses a variety of projects with an aim to expand the debate on video and new media and their conflation with sexual politics by considering multiple, fragmented, but also intersecting narratives of exclusion to which art and artists from the region have been subjected to.

Part II: *Sexing the Border: Artistic Practice* discusses the specific examples of artistic practices from the region. Contributors to Part II look more closely at the range of practices associated with video and new media art, by considering the work of individual artists and also including their own. Cultural production in the region is examined with an emphasis on the contested, fragmented and fluid nature of Central and Eastern European geographies and their politics, offering an alternative perspective on the complexity of gender representation and video and new media practice. Chapters in Part II engage with alternative paradigms and counter-institutional discourses, alongside investigations of the ideological contexts framing artists' engagement with video and new media practice and situated enquiries into gender relations, conceptualised as power relations. The chapters offer insights into a medium choice, in particular regarding the prioritisation of specific media (for instance, photography or video). Chapters in this section discuss the relationship of 'identity' (regional, gender, and 'other') to nationalism, framed as an always incomplete process, as well as to various instances of ideological domination and resistance. Also, reflections are offered in relation to the 'other' (for instance, Russia or Bulgaria as in chapter 4 on performance

documentation, gender and Internet use) and the impact of censorship on construction of new media art histories, framed as gendered histories in given contexts as well as the reception of post-Socialist new media histories.

Part III: *Curating the Border: Putting Politics of Gender on the Agenda in Post-Socialist Europe* is concerned with an articulation of video and new media art histories as gendered narratives in national or international contexts, in the realms demarcated by the rise of 'internal' borders dividing Central and Eastern Europe into a 'new Europe' (national spaces annexed to the EU), and wider, between discourses of East and West. The chapters in this section include the incorporation of video and new media work from the region into feminist and post-feminist curatorial projects with a transnational purview. The chapters offer a reflection of how artists' (gendered) identities and working practices are shaped through the processes of living and working 'between' East and West. The theoretical framings adopted for the analysis of video and new media work are signposted, and how such frameworks accommodated or resisted an engagement with feminist politics, are also reflected upon.

Part I begins with chapter 1 by Mark Gisbourne which discusses some of the key examples of artistic co-production that emerged under the Socialist realms in the 1960 and 1970s and in Western Europe at the same time. The author points out the importance of mutuality and the principle of creative dependency while discussing the artists' works and a more radical nature of practice that embraced a vision of working placed outside individuality for a realisation of creative pursuits. The author highlights an impact of a Soviet Russian ideology on practice of the Soviet Union-based artists Komar & Melamid. Their strategy of the appropriation of the media for inverting propaganda in particular, was mirrored in the conditioned socio-political reality of Yugoslavia for the conceptual and performance-based relationship of Ulay/Abramović. Gisbourne juxtaposes the Soviet versions of Communism with the Western European liberal realms while discussing the examples of the British artists Gilbert and George's performative practice that includes performance of gender, as well as the taxonomic photographic works of German artists Bernd and Hilla Becher with their pioneering recordings of domestic architecture and industrial infrastructure. Chapter 2 by Beata Hock analyses social and professional mobility of artists from Central and Eastern Europe. She refers to 'the other' part of Europe, to the Western Europe, drawing on the examples of three intermedia art projects including video installation, film, photography and web, realised by female artists and spanning from the period of the Cold War of the 1980s, the socio-economic and political

transition of the late 1990s and the early 2000s, and the current condition of a more liberal Europe of the late 2000s. Chapter 3 by Josip Zanki examines the relationship between tradition, folklore, history and gender construction in the countries of the former Yugoslavia and Western Balkans. More specifically, the author draws on the examples of video and installation works from the region to explore artistic representation of masculinities in the Balkans. The author reflects on use of technology and points out the difference in video and lens-based generated image. In the Western Balkans, according to Zanki, video image continues to be used predominantly as a means of documenting realities, events, ideologies, versions of 'truths' while in the Western consumerist context video productions are now more associated with the forms of entertainment and creations that result in spectacular events and installations.

Part II opens with Chapter 4 by Boryana Rossa, examining the use of technology for performance art documentation in the digital age. The author examines how documenting technology can alter established hierarchies between an artist and audience, drawing on examples of representation of gender in performance art from Russia and Bulgaria, including the author's own works, and making references to other artists from Central and Eastern Europe. The chapter refers to liberalization of technology through mobile Internet including digital photography, video, interactive blogs and social networks facilitated access that altered the relationship in production and reception of art. Chapter 5 by Agata Rogoś addresses questions associated with gender identity performance and image manipulation, drawing on the video installation and photographic works by the Polish multimedia artist Andrzej Karmasz. The author examines artistic method and representation, commenting on a cultural nature of blurring gender difference and the feminization of a male body more generally. Furthermore, the chapter contextualizes the artist's practice that seems demarcated by a polarization of gender dualism and lack of tolerance for difference in contemporary Poland. Section II closes with chapter 6 by the Israeli artist Inga Fonar Cocos, born in Warsaw, Poland and currently living in Tel-Aviv, Israel. The author discusses the interdependence of memory and history in the context of border crossing; a physical border crossing associated with the Jewish Diaspora, in particular, concerning a wave of post Second World War migration from an ancestral land of Europe to a new homeland of Israel. The author investigates how, using technology, invisible domains of a human cognition associated with the processes of remembering and forgetting can be represented. In discussing a nuanced relationship between a memory affected by the processes of relocation and a historical record, Fonar



Cocos draws on the examples of her recent video works. Using video, photography and documentary material, the author reflects on various ways of coming to terms with the perception of social and political reality, workings of memory and ways of dealing with history; taking as a point of departure understandings of subjectivity and human existence as forming an inextricable part of what reality is.

The last section of the volume, Part III opens with chapter 7 by Paweł Leszkowicz which discusses examples of video art that address the question of female homoeroticism, based on *Ars Homo Erotica* exhibition showcased in National Museum in Warsaw in 2010. The author discusses a selection of works by the Polish artist Izabella Gustowska and the Slovakian artist Anna Daučíková. Both artists are considered the pioneers of feminist video art that originated in Central and Eastern Europe. Chapter 8 by Iliyana Nedkova surveys two new media art curatorial projects entitled *Crossing Over*, 1996-2003 and *Desktop Icons*, 2001-2003. Acknowledging that geo-cultural and gender borders are still shifting, the author reflects upon the question what it means to create and curate in European spaces between East and West. In chapter 9, I address cultural tactics situated in the neo-liberal context of today's Europe, tactics that point to alternative modes of instituting and relating to spaces of institutions and society. The chapter introduces and reflects on art practice and curatorial strategies broadly enveloped in what I refer to as feminist tactics of today. In the final chapter of this volume, chapter 10, Marina Gržinić and Aneta Stojnić trace a historical line of feminist-centered art interventions and activist movements in the countries of the Former Yugoslavia. The authors explore the transformation of feminism from the 1970s towards LGBT activism, arriving at a re-politicization of a queer movement in post-Socialist Europe whereby the sexually queer has morphed into the politically queer.

## Bibliography

- Badovinac, Zdenka, *Body and the East: From the 1960s to the Present*, MIT Press: Cambridge, MA and London, 1999
- Gržinić, Marina and Ostojić, Tanja (Ed) *Integration Impossible? The Politics of Migration in the Artwork of Tanja Ostojić*, Argobooks: Berlin, 2009.
- Gržinić, Marina and Velagić Tanja (Ed) *New-Media Technology, Science, and Politics: The Video Art of Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid*, Löcker: Vienna, 2008.
- Imre, Aniko *Identity Games: Globalization and the Transformation of Media Cultures in the New Europe* MIT Press: Cambridge, MA and London, 2009.
- IRWIN (Ed) *East Art Map: Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe Afterall*: London, 2006.
- Butler, Judith. 'Preface (1999)' in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge: London and New York. 1990.
- De Lauretis, Teresa. 'Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities', *differences: a Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 3(2): iii-xviii, 1991.

**PART I:**

**CROSSING THE BORDER:  
HISTORIES AND FRAMEWORKS**



# CHAPTER ONE

## DOUBLE ACT: TWO ARTISTS ONE EXPRESSION

MARK GISBOURNE

### **Introduction**

This chapter addresses artistic co-production that is framed as a double act. I will discuss the examples of double act artistic co-production that emerged under Socialist realms. Russian artists Komar & Melamid and German and ex-Yugoslavian artists Ulay/Abramović are examples of double acts where the most important principle for art making was based on mutuality and creative dependency. I will also contextualise their artistic practice in relation to double act artists that emerged at the same time in Western Europe, such as the British artists Gilbert & George and German artists Bernd and Hilla Becher.

The term ‘double act’ originated in the music hall and popular theatre, in which ‘double acts’, or comedy duos, played off each other for laughs. Later, the idea was transferred to television. In double acts, the ‘straight’ man cannot work or fulfil his aims without the ‘funny’ man and vice versa. However, the double act artists discussed in this chapter are not comedians, and far from it. What they share with the term ‘double act’ is a sense of two people using but one expression. One artwork emerges, but one that has been thought through and achieved collaboratively. Distinctions, therefore, need to be made between what constitutes an artist’s ‘double act’ and artist-couples, who may at times collaborate but still retain their singular artistic autonomy. Regardless of their personal relationships (brothers, sisters, lovers, friends), the ‘double act’ artists have chosen (I stress ‘have chosen’) to sublimate a pursuit of a singular subjectivity within a shared endeavour. Hence, it serves little purpose to establish which element belongs to which artist in the artworks realised, and to do so mitigates against the intentions of the ‘double act’ artists themselves. However, this description speaks to psychological motives, and it is the radical nature of the contemporary practitioners discussed in this chapter, that they used to work outside the stereotypes of individuality

in their creative visions. In a certain sense, they challenged the conventions of art history that would seek to categorise and attribute specific individual roles to each of them. This does not mean, however, that their work is not immediately recognisable and possessed of certain striking and particular characteristics. Neither, of course, does it mean that the artists involved are not without their own strong individual personalities.

It is a long established cliché in the visual arts that creative endeavours are the product of a singular vision. There have nonetheless always been movements of the like-minded, and at times, manifest examples of collaborations, both large and small, using either workshops, ateliers, factories, manifestoes, or a whole array of alternative collective strategies. Indeed, art history spends much of its time reconstructing the Medieval, Renaissance, or Baroque ateliers, the role of masters and assistants, and historical art workshop practices in general. This notwithstanding, all is generally subsumed beneath the singularity of the master's name, the singular visionary who affords the style and the stamp of individual authenticity. Since the Romantic Age, and with the demise of large traditional artist workshops (for example, Rubens in the 17th century may have had up to a hundred assistants), and the coming of the art school and academies replacing the former master-assistant model, the idea of a unique and singular artistic voice has become ever more pronounced. The 19th century avant-garde position, particularly in the 'art for art's sake' camp of argument, privileges the singularity of each individual contribution. No matter how collaborative a particular art movement may have been perceived, modern art history segments and dissects the inner workings of group identities in order to generate individual specificities, and uses both intellectual and material analysis to individuate each member of an artistic movement. This though has never been so pronounced among the other leading arts such as music, theatre, film, and dance, where collaboration is a necessary commonplace. This said, the extraction of individuals in terms of their creative intervention has just as readily been highlighted, such as the composer, the instrumentalist, the actor, the film director, and so on.

As we live in an age of visual arts celebrity, the attachment of a unique sense of singularity to an individual artist has become all-consuming; the Warhol exhibition, the Picasso show, etc. Countless exhibitions take place in public spaces and museums that privilege the name of individual art makers, frequently allied of course to the publicity, or 'bums-on-seats' effect that the named artist is able to generate. In the last thirty years or so, this point of view has been progressively challenged by a new phenomenon. We find it increasingly common that two artists work together, but wish to sublimate their singular identity into a shared

expression. They are artists who wish to subsume the 'I' for the 'we', and in so doing try in some measure to undermine and refocus the nature of, and our attitudes towards, what constitutes singular subjectivity. Artists usually do not sit around speculating as to whether they are post-modern or late Capitalists as such. Today though, it is equally true that they are clearly aware of the value of money, and develop distinct strategies as well as aims for their success. The myth of the solitary angst-ridden artist is precisely that (and probably always was), nothing but a myth.

This chapter concentrates on 'double acts' of the Socialist period. It focuses on two examples - precursors of the double act phenomena, artists whose beginnings date from the 1960s and 1970s. These include in Socialist realms the examples of artist duos, such as Ulay/Abramović and Komar & Melamid. Similarly, we can refer to double act artists who emerged at that time in the West, such as Gilbert & George or Bernd and Hilla Becher. Drawing on historical developments offers a degree of insight to the potential forms of 'double act' creativity that have been taken up by the subsequent generations that follow. We will find no abstract painters and no overly existential clichés - though this does not mean that existential phenomena have not been addressed in other ways. Abstract forms of artistic production have predominantly been singular fixations on the relation of subject-object and overwhelmingly subjective in their interpretation. Artists have pursued either the metaphysical (spiritual) ideas at one end of the spectrum, and or the phenomenological or conceptual object at the other. Certain characteristics and questions immediately emerge as regards to our 'double acts', not least what benefits accrue from two people working as a single expressive unit? How does the relationship of two persons alter and shape the development of a work? What other intentions are thrown up as a result of there being two persons? How does the collaboration take its form and manifest itself in the art work? Are there distinguishable boundaries within the double contributions and are they relevant? What is meant by an implied mutuality of intention?

### **Komar & Melamid vs Gilbert & George**

Soviet Russian ideology did not offer the freedom or possibilities of an open society's materialist and discursive mobility for Komar & Melamid, as the British context did for Gilbert & George. Conversely, and in the same time period, through their taxonomic photographic works, Bernd and Hilla Becher scoured the Western world in pursuit of recording the passing of domestic architecture and industrial infrastructure. What can be assumed from these examples is that the doubled identity of expression is clearly not manifested or restricted to a specific place or a theme.

However, there is an obvious British-ness in Gilbert & George's East London subject matter, in contrast to Bechers' German photographic history with its interest in taxonomy and classification, echoing as it does earlier physiognomic and social (as distinct from architectural) precedents in the photography of August Sander (1876-1964).

The fact that Gilbert & George are so readily identifiable indicates in some measure that they see themselves as both, the subject and object of the art they make. The standard three or four-buttoned suit has always been their attire of choice. This was apparent from the beginning in their living or singing sculpture performances like *Underneath the Arches* (1969).<sup>1</sup> The title which derives from the song of the music hall comedy double act Flanagan and Allen, and became their signature tune (Bud Flanagan, born Chaim Reuven Weintrop, 1896-1968, Chesney Allen 1893-1982). Although Gilbert & George trained at St Martin's Art School, London, as sculptors (they first met there in 1967), the general rubric of their work has always been art and life, or better put, life as is lived becoming the basis for art. From 1971, they moved into photography as their primary medium. The subject matter of their early black and white photo-pieces up to 1974, with their ciphers of local history and hints of monarchism, the swastika, went totally against the 1960s ethos and the early 1970s spirit of leftist revolt and hippy-ism. From 1974, the primary grid structure (first begun with their *Cherry Blossom* series) emerged, and the pattern of producing works in thematic serialisations began. Whether it is their own physical ejaculations as in *Coming* (1975), or street graffiti as in *Are You Angry or Are You Boring?* (1977) and *The Penis* (1978), or the series *Dusty Corners* (1975), everything stems from what they know and see in their daily lives. The works of the second half of the 1970s were all in black and white, with the singular addition of hand-coloured red. Since 1980, the thematic series have continued in ever greater colourful elaboration, always as an art for all "we want Our Art to speak across the barriers of knowledge, directly to People about their Life and not about their knowledge of art" ('What Our Art Means', Statement by the artists, in Obrist and Violette, 1997, 149).

Mutuality of intention is manifested by the fact that there is always a co-equal presence in everything they do, and if they disagree on things, it is never exposed to public scrutiny. Though this does not mean that their works have not been extremely prescient and a touchstone as regards to what has followed in social and cultural terms.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Flanagan arches are almost certainly those of the railway arches around Liverpool Street, the railway station of the East of London. One of Gilbert & George's living sculpture performances took place under the arches, in Cable Street in 1970 (near to Limehouse Station).



The art work of Russian artists Komar & Melamid of the 1970s was indeed very different from the performative life and art of Gilbert and George. In many respects, Komar & Melamid's art was a dissident art and more conceptually driven. Komar & Melamid was the Russian-born, USA-based conceptual artistic male tandem of Vitaly Komar (born in 1943) and Alexander Melamid (born in 1945). Their use of strategy and media, the appropriation of media for inverting propaganda in particular, became an extended subversion of the immediate Soviet political system in which they operated (Nathanson, 1979). Thereafter, following their departure from the Soviet Union for Israel in 1977 as well as their relocation to the USA (they moved to New York in 1978), Komar & Melamid embraced a sense of dissidence in retrospect, deeply embedded in memory, history, and nostalgia. The two artists first met in the morgue at the Institute of Physical Culture, Moscow in 1963, at the time they both were students at the Stroganov Institute of Art and Design. They both graduated in 1967. Their training was classically academic and pre-Modernist, and hence, they attended the anatomy studies at the morgue. They came from families that were part of the Soviet professional classes, though both were Russian Jewish and constantly made aware of it, and it remains unclear as to whether this was the reason why they were blocked from becoming full members of the Moscow Union of Artists at the time. In turn, they were allowed to become members of the Graphic Artists' Organisation. While they only worked sporadically together during this time, they kept in contact in the years up to 1972. In the interim, they both married and had children. The moment of coming together as a double act was gradual, but fully took shape when they worked together at a children's camp near Moscow in 1972. The director of the camp pointed out to them a buried concrete bust of Stalin, claiming that busts that were too large were to be destroyed, and were buried all over the Soviet Union (Ratcliff, 1988, 17). Stalin's representation had all but disappeared in Komar & Melamid's early childhood, and Stalin's cult of personality was erased during the Krushchev reform years (Party Secretary of the Communist Party from 1953-1964), and was to become an important influence on their subsequent work. The theme of childhood recollection, the persistence of memories and nostalgia all have always been positively affirmed by the artists: "Through Stalin Art", said Komar, "we could recreate our childhood". This was not because they weren't aware of the monstrous tyranny Stalin had perpetrated on the Soviet people, but because he represented an access for them to the lost certainties of their childhood memories, and to and age of national paternalism.

From this situation emerged what they called their 'Sots' art, a fusion of Socialist art with Pop art, a strategy of working with media appropriation. The distinction being that, what was an engagement with

consumer abundance in the West, stood in direct contrast to material shortages in the Communist system at that time. The domain and media means of corporate or mass advertising in the West was the sole prerogative of State propaganda in the Soviet Union. The dissident and hidden nature of their early production, their ironic *Paradise* environmental installation, in a Moscow apartment in 1973, contained sculpted figures (including a suspended Prometheus who dripped a red liquid), light fixtures, pseudo-landscapes, toy soldiers, and instruments of war smothering a Buddha. Throughout the installation, Soviet radio blared out, creating and mirroring in microcosm the sense of State claustrophobia they were then experiencing. 1974 saw their involvement in the Bulldozer exhibition at Beljaevo, on the outskirts of Moscow, organised by Oscar Rabin. The show was literally bulldozed and all the works were destroyed. The early Sots Art series inverted the vocabulary and meaning of Soviet official culture, as in their canvas *Laika Cigarette Box* (1972). Laika was a dog sent into outer space on an early Sputnik. The dog died and became something of a Soviet national hero. Whereas in the West, artists like Warhol appropriated and celebrated icons of consumer culture (his Coke bottles or Brillo boxes), Komar & Melamid subverted media representations of State icons and their propagandist conventions. Their first *Double Self-Portrait* (1973) was based on an earlier double portrait of Lenin and Stalin (circa 1950). The work, part of the Bulldozer exhibition, was made again later. Parodies of Soviet banners, and popular propaganda were similarly subverted, as in *Onward to the Victory of Communism* (1972).



Figure 1.1 Komar & Melamid install their one day exhibition, Café Blue Bird, Moscow, November 1967. Courtesy of Vitaly Komar



Figure 1.2 Vitaly Komar with *Post-Art* from *Pictures of the Future* series (1973-74). Open Door Show of non-conformist artists, Ismailowsky Park, Moscow, 1974. Courtesy of Vitaly Komar

Unlike Gilbert & George whose work tended to be more literal, the context of Komar & Melamid necessarily made their work more conceptual. They even constructed fictional written biographies and pictorial identities of non-existent artists, as in the sixty small panels work attributed to *Nikolai Buchamov* (1973), or the fictional mid-18th century (deemed abstract) painter, ironically called Apelles Ziablov. These more conceptual ideas were extended later after they reached, first Israel, then New York, in works like *Performance: Canine Art (Teaching a Dog to Draw)* (1978). The Soviet promotion of science and technology and media-driven propaganda was always subject to parody and subversion by Komar & Melamid. The State's addiction to systems was frequently questioned by them, as in their *Translation of Article 129 of the Constitution of the R.S.F.S.R* (1974). This work refers to Article 129 that proposed freedom of speech, press, assembly and demonstrations, and saw each letter translated in paint tube colours, making it incomprehensible to decipher without knowing the code.



Figure 1.3 Komar & Melamid, *Post-Art #1 (A. Warhol)*.  
From *Pictures of the Future* series (1973-74). Courtesy of Vitaly Komar

It was a reflection they thought, of their ignored reality in the Soviet Union at that time. Objects and performance also played their part, as in the series of their works entitled *Catalogue of Superobjects - Supercomfort for Superpeople* (1976). Their experience of Western art at this time was largely restricted to magazine reproductions, but it should not be thought that they were particularly enamoured of its virtues; the artists have remained in many respects ambivalent towards it even to this day. Their works *Post-Art No. 1 (Warhol)* and *Post-Art No.2 (Lichtenstein)* were paintings of a badly charred Warhol Campbell's Soup Can, and a burnt fragment of a Lichtenstein's comic strip (Figures 1.2 and 1.3). The artists' critique of Western (notable American) forms of art patronage and consumption was developed later (Wypijewski et al, 1997; 1998). Thus, their style during this period 1972-1977 was deliberately pluralistic, conforming where necessary to the given needs of the idea at hand. Their subsequent use of academic history painting emerged predominantly at the time they were leaving the Soviet Union. It was after all, the official style of Social Realist painting (Figure 1.4). Not surprisingly, the use of this style conforms to Komar & Melamid's later confession of intentional nostalgia, and their period as dissidents in retrospect. The artists used a complex idea of time, linked to their philosophy of dark painting and the subsequent accretions of necessary time that should be applied to painting (Woollen, 1985). The question of the accumulation of time in painting has strong roots in the Russian Icon tradition of painting. In a work like *Double Self-Portrait* (1977), painted at the time of their departure from the Soviet Union, rather than looking like 20th century men, the artists pass for monks as in perhaps a 17th century painting by Zurbaran. Visually, Komar and Melamid's use of history painting, mixing media appropriation in subverting propaganda with the use of traditional methods, always gives a sense of an uncertain period of execution; it is their subject matter that contextualises them. And for this reason, they detest the idea of contemporary restoration. Their most well known works called *Nostalgic Social Realism Series* (1982-1983), *Scenes for the Future* (1983-1984), and *Anarchistic Synthesisism Series* (1985-1986) are devoted to their strange relationship with Soviet times and Russian history painting, and not least with the Red Tsar Stalin who is repeatedly represented. Perhaps, a painting like *The Origin of Socialist Realism* (1982), regardless of the numerous Renaissance and Baroque iconographic and literary references, makes also a reference to something else. Is it about the ironic melodrama that history painting creates when seen in retrospect? Or, is it about paternalism and the male ego? Whether it is the *Portrait of Hitler* or *Robert Reagan as a Centaur* (1981), or their *Stalin with Hitler's Remains* (1986), they may have far less to do with actual history than we might suppose.



Figure 1.4 Komar & Melamid, *Paradise/Pantheon*, (1972-1973).  
Installation view in private apartment, Moscow. Courtesy of Vitaly Komar

They seem to suggest that history is always the product of a collective iconic repetition, portrayed and channelled through media.

The coming together of Komar & Melamid as a double act, in 1972, is best understood as like-mindedness brought together in a forced circumstance of political and ethnic discrimination. Seemingly, since their amicable parting in 2003, the circumstance no longer applies. Their shared identity as dissident artists largely dissolved with the end of the Soviet Union, and the grounds for what they initially critiqued are no longer present. In the last twenty years, in what they called their 'Transtate' reality, the satirical critique in their works has been turned against the United States of America. For them, the USA has been a country with repressive tendencies, analogous to that of the former Soviet Union.

### Ulay and Abramović

In the case of Ulay and Abramović's co-production we can be more circumspect. Ulay (Frank Uwe Laysiepen) was born in Solingen, Germany and is currently based in Ljubljana and Amsterdam and Marina Abramović is ex-Yugoslavian Belgrade-born and currently a New York based artist. In the twelve years, between 1976 and 1988, the two artists came together as a 'double act' in a conceptual and performance-based relationship (Ulay and Abramović in *Performances 1976-1988*, ex. cat., Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, 1997). The actual extended character of their relationship as a couple was an accepted given and never specifically placed in the foreground. As far as their art performances were concerned, they claimed they were in pursuit of universal dualism in which the limits of their bodies were to become part of a shared but transformed identity:

"Giving up your ego and working with someone who maintains a very ego-based personality is an unusual thing to do. That was the thing to shake out, to reduce our egos to our personalities." (Kokke in interview with Ulay and Abramović, 1997, 119)

Their performance works exist mostly through video documented footage and can be characterised by five divisions: the *Relation Work* (1976-80), *That Self* (1980), *Nightsea Crossing* (1981-87), *Modus Vivendi* (1981-87), and *The Lovers - The Great Wall Walk* (1988). At the same time, the performance works of Ulay and Abramović operate on the interface of ethics and aesthetics, East and West, and what might be called the anthropology of human relations (McEvelley, 1985).

The *Relation Work* more than anything else is an example of a mutuality of shared intentions, expressed by either immobility or activity.

In *Relation in Time* (October, 1977) the artists sat with their backs to each other and with their hair tied together for sixteen immobile hours. The audience came in and they remained in the same position for another hour. Whereas in *Imponderabilia* (June, 1977):

“We were standing naked in the main entrance of the museum. The public entering the Museum had to pass sideways through the small space between us. Each person had to choose which one of us to face.”

The performance lasted ninety minutes. Conversely, in action relations such as *Workrelation* (September 1978), Ulay and Abramović did heavy physical work transporting backwards and forwards the same bricks in buckets, to seemingly no actual end or purpose. The performance lasted either two, three or eight hours, depending on the location where it took place. In *The Brink* (April, 1979), at the Third Sydney Biennial, Ulay walked along the top of a wall, while Abramović walked along the line of the shadow cast by the wall. The performance lasted four-and-a-half hours until the shadow diffused with the passage of the sun. Or, again in *AAA-AAA*:

“We were facing each other, both producing a continuous vocal sound. We slowly built up the tension, our faces coming closer together until we were screaming into each other’s mouths.”<sup>2</sup>

This work was not unrelated to *Breathing In - Breathing Out* (April, 1977), where their mouths were pressed together and they inhaled and exhaled each other’s carbon dioxide. The performance lasted nineteen minutes.

The social-anthropological content of their performances documented on video became more pronounced after 1980, though the relational contents remained. It may have been presaged in some way by their work *Communist Body - Capitalist Body* (November, 1979). Two tables and place settings were presented side by side, one with the more elegant Capitalist contents such as napkins, porcelain, champagne glasses, silver cutlery, etc. The other had enamel cups, toilet paper, and aluminium knives and forks. The two artists slept on a mattress covered by a white sheet and a red blanket. Another table contained their birth certificates, one from Capitalist West Germany, and the other from Communist Yugoslavia. Psychological experiments in hypnosis followed (“our aims were to explore the subconscious”). The issue of physical contact and emotional dependency was also extensively explored in their

---

<sup>2</sup> The series of descriptive quotes for their works is from *Ulay/Abramović: Performances 1976-1988*, which presents the performances in individual sections that are not paginated.



performances, as in *Rest Energy* (January/August, 1980), where with a tensioned longbow Ulay held the taut string and arrow, and Abramović held the arc of the bow while leaning backwards. The arrow was pointed towards her heart. The work *Nightsea Crossing* (1981-1987) was performed in many locations across the world, sometimes including other participants like a Tibetan monk, or simply an independent observer. The essence was that the two artists sat across a table from another, motionless, and without speaking or eating. This performance in some instances lasted for days. A whole series of works under the general heading *Modus Vivendi* (Ways of Living, 1981-1987) also took place across the world incorporating others, and extending the anthropological discourse of cultural relativism into relational inclusion. It was a general feature of the 1970s end of art, end of painting argument, that a sincere and truthful art found its roots in the life of living cultures, and not simply in the artifice of formal art making as a thing or end in itself.

The conclusion of Ulay and Abramović working together came with their filmed project called *The Lovers - The Great Wall Walk* (March-June, 1988), in which they walked the whole length of the Great Wall of China from opposite directions. The implication being that at each moment they were getting closer to one another, they met eventually after ninety days at Er Lang Shan, in Shen Mu, Shaanxi province. While their period as a double act throughout exemplified their status as lovers, and an intense human desire to become (in and through their performance works) empathically closer to one another, in the end it became no longer sustainable. Ulay has pointed out:

“I have no particular reason for our separation. After twelve years something happened. We couldn’t hold on to our ideology to become ‘one’, to experience the union of man and woman, which had been the reason why we were so close together and why we were moving so strongly in the same direction.”

Conversely, Marina Abramović has argued: “It was not so much a mutual decision as a simultaneous desire to break up. I had to leave this bond and Ulay wanted to get out from his side.” (Kokke, 1997, 117) Marina Abramović has furthered extended her explanations by reflecting upon a general phenomenon of the 1980s, as being a time when artists wanted to return to their own studios.

### **Bernd and Hilla Becher**

On the face of it any consideration of the German artists Bernd (1931-2007) and Hilla Becher (born 1934) is far less fraught with the apparent

intensity of the Ulay/Abramović relationship. The Bechers were a married couple who have always shared the same intellectual and black and white photographic interests. This said their work is no less complex for all that. Bernd Becher became a Professor of Photography at the Düsseldorf Art Academy, though in reality he and Hilla Becher have always operated as a team; a team not easily separated (Lange, 2005). Their work has fostered a generation of students that have become a unique historical School of Photography itself (such as for instance Candida Höfer, Thomas Struth, Thomas Ruff, and Andreas Gursky, to mention but a few). Bernd and Hilla met at the Düsseldorf Academy, where they had both studied painting and married in 1961. However, as early as 1959, they had both started documenting rapidly disappearing early forms of industrial architecture. Today, the 1960s has now become seen in retrospect as being the moment when older forms of production were beginning to be displaced by the consumer society; a period which some Marxist theorists have chosen to call late Capitalism (Jameson, 1991).



Figure 1.5 Bernd and Hilla Becher, *Industrial Landscapes (Coalmine): Zeche Consolidation, Gelsenkirchen, Ruhr, Germany, 1974.*  
Courtesy Sonnabend Gallery, New York

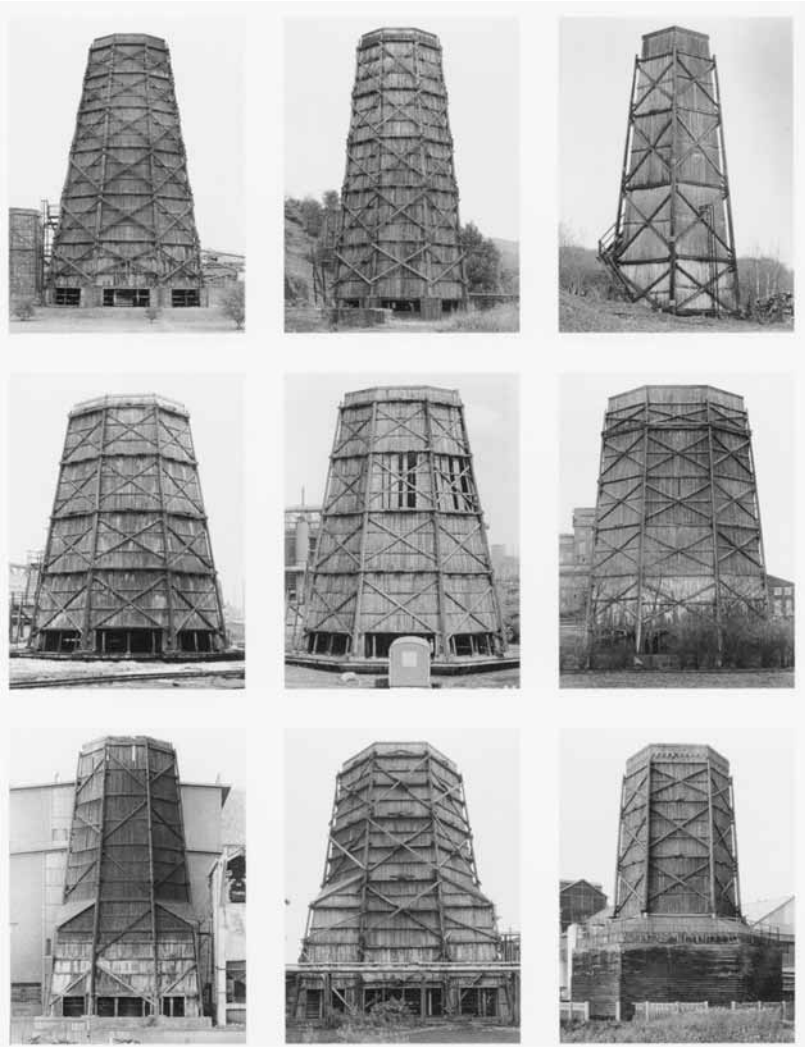


Figure 1.6 Bernd and Hilla Becher, *Cooling Towers*, 1961-1987 (2003).  
Courtesy Sonnabend Gallery, New York

From their first exhibition in 1963, in Siegen, they immediately revealed a commitment to taxonomy, and to bringing together the similarities of shape and design found in earlier domestic or industrial typological infrastructures. This took place first in Germany, and

thereafter, as they travelled extensively in the 1960s and 1970s across the Western World. It is for this reason that many works had a long gestation, for example *Fördertürme, Deutschland, England, Frankreich* (Mineshafts, Germany, England, France, 1968-1997) and similar projects (Figures 1.5 and 1.7). There is the same accuracy of approach and endeavour whether recording industry-related historical dwellings as in *Fachwerkhäuser, Industriegebiet, Deutschland* (Timbered Workhouses, Germany, 1959-1976) *Cooling Towers, 1961-1987* (Figure 1.6), or industrial objects like *Gasbehälter, Deutschland* (Gasometers, Germany, 1983-1992).

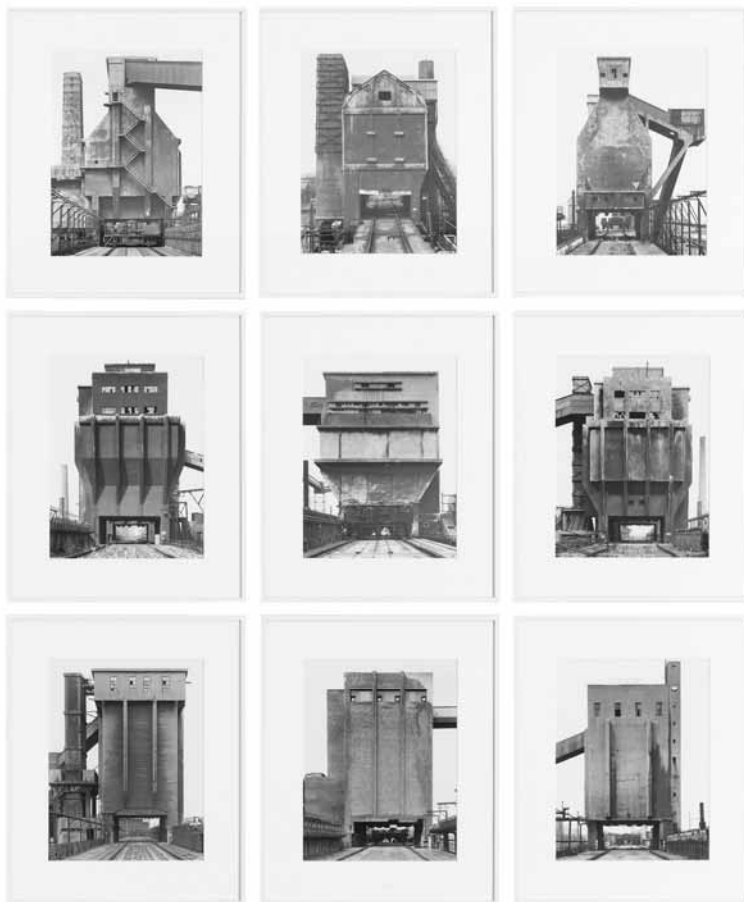


Figure 1.7 Bernd and Hilla Becher *Coal Bunkers Frontal* (2012).  
Courtesy Sonnabend Gallery, New York

Their working practice has always been to take black and white photographs (in this they have never deviated) with a large format camera from many viewpoints, but for their presentation a standardised and equalised viewpoint was subsequently established. This meant on occasions that they had to adopt certain positions of eye line that were not immediately possible, whether or not any photographic cropping was used. This question had been both challenged and debated. It is an extremely formal and schematic system that they followed. The images were then presented in a rigid grid formation, not unlike that used later more freely by Komar & Melamid. While they adopted the grid, a classical trope of Modernism, the long period of each projects' gestation suggested a synchronous sense of time which might equally be read as touching upon the anti-diachronic aspects associated with the postmodern. In formal terms, it was also a logical complement to the grid-like configurations found in many of the domestic and industrial constructions. The presence of humans, the actual engineers and or builders of these industrial edifices, are not or rarely seen but remain the hidden visible of their ongoing industrial tabulations. Single images as presentations, in works such as *Kalköfen, Brielle, NL* (Lime Kiln, Brielle, Netherlands, 1968), or *Kalköfen, Hönnetal, Sauerland, D* (Lime Kiln, Hönnetal, Sauerland, 1996), sometimes take on qualities that often make them appear as singular works of industrial sculpture. Though not without precedent, such industrial buildings were often photographed in Germany in 1920s (another period of great German taxonomic interest), such projects had never been more systematically undertaken as the recording approach and method applied by Bernd and Hilla Becher. Their work is in fact probably closer to the 1960s revival of Malevich-like constructivism, remembering that Blinky Palermo and Imi Knoebel were also studying at Düsseldorf at the same time. Since what the Bechers have systematically recorded is quite literally passing away in front of our eyes, there is an inevitable sense of poignancy experienced when looking at their images. Though some have wished to see their work as a form of historical nostalgia and set it in a negative light, it nonetheless remains a startling accomplishment of aesthetic documentation. As a result, the increasing re-use of pre-existent industrial architecture for other purposes has been deeply influenced by them. One might like to think of Tate Modern in London, a former power station, or even the Museum Kuppermühle für Moderne Kunst in Duisburg (both were executed by Herzog and De Meuron), and there are numerous others.

## Conclusions

It is clear that motives for forming 'double acts' vary considerably. For Komar & Melamid, it was formed in many respects by their dissident circumstances in living and creating in the Soviet Union. In the case of Ulay/Abramović, it was driven by a profound psycho-physiological, experimental and relational need as well as attraction, enveloped in a strong political message. For Gilbert & George, it was a clearly defined and developmental strategy, and for the Bechers, it was a couple in a married situation where they shared the same passionate photographic interests and concerns for the subject matter.

As precursors (and there are other examples, for instance KwieKulik - the Polish conceptual artistic tandem of Przemysław KwieKulik and Zofia Kulik), these double acts touched upon many of the themes they engaged with intensely, and in many different ways influenced the generations that followed. If a double act was unusual or occasional in the 1960s and 1970s, it became something of a phenomenon in the 1980s and 1990s. Among the many themes they inherited from their immediate 'double act' precursors were performance, transgression, prohibition and taboo, gender and desire, technology, war, crime, punishment, political and sexual anarchy, history, memory and nostalgia. There is no suggestion made here, however, that these subjects were not also the concerns of many artists pursuing a singular subjectivity.

## Bibliography

- Jameson, Fredric *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Duke University Press: Durham, NC, 1991.
- Kokke, Paul 'An Interview with Ulay and Abramović', *Ulay/Abramović: Performances 1976-1988*, ex. cat., Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, 1997.
- Lange, Susanne *Was wir tun, ist letztlich Geschichte erzählen... Bernd und Hilla Becher, Einführung in Leben und Werk*, Schirmer/Mosel Verlag: Munich, 2005.
- McEvelley, Thomas 'Ethics, Aesthetics, and Relation in the Work of Marina Abramović and Ulay'. In *Modus Vivendi: Works 1980-85*, ex. cat., Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum: Eindhoven, 1985.
- Nathanson, Melvyn. B. (Ed) *Komar, Melamid: Two Soviet Dissident Artists*, Feffer and Simons: London and New York, 1979.
- Ratcliff, Carter *Komar & Melamid*, Abbeville Press: New York, 1988.
- Obrist, Hans-Ulrich and Violette, Robert *The Words of Gilbert & George: With Portraits of the Artists from 1986 to 1997*, Thames and Hudson: London, 1997.

*Ulay/Abramović: Performances 1976-1988*, ex. cat., Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, 1997.

Wollen, Peter *Komar and Melamid: History Painting*, Fruitmarket Gallery Publications: Edinburgh, 1985

Wypijewski Joann (Ed), *Melamid, Aleksandr and Komar Vitaly Painting by Numbers: Komar & Melamid's Scientific Guide to Art*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux: New York, 1997; and University of Southern California Press: Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1998.





## CHAPTER TWO

# MOVING ACROSS EUROPE: THREE CASE STUDIES ON SEX-APPEAL

BEATA HOCK

### Introduction

This chapter critically discusses three art projects by artists from the Central Eastern European region, each representing a different generation, whose work cluster around the exploration of social and professional mobility. Notably, all three artists are female and have arranged to relocate from the ‘other half’ of Europe, from Hungary and Serbia (ex-Yugoslavia), to Western European capital cities. The Hungarian-born Paris-based artist Judit Kele in her performance entitled *I am a Work of Art* (1980) highlighted the status of Eastern European women in the context of Cold War Europe, with the result of the project facilitating Kele to relocate and settle down in France the same year. Kele auctioned herself as an artwork, and the bidders were selected from respondents to a matrimonial ad she had placed previously. Some twenty years later, Tanja Ostojić (born in Serbia, then part of Yugoslavia, currently based in Berlin), was *Looking for a Husband with EU Passport* (2000-2005) in the performative framework of a web-based art piece. Ostojić reflected upon the view of migrant women under the conditions of unequal globalization and migrated to Germany through the use of her marriage ad. Both Kele and Ostojić relied on peculiar forms of sex-appeal and the institution of marriage in their performative works. The personal narrative of social and professional mobility of another female artist, the Hungarian-born, Berlin-based Tímea Oravecz continues to unfold today in various cities of the allegedly borderless European Union. In her projects *Time Lost* (2007-2008) and *Cosmopolitan* (2009) she commented that as an immigrant she was driven to use irregular means to relocate, starting out from the

position of Europe's disadvantaged other. Oravec, however, no longer chooses to fall back on her sex-appeal in order to 'arrive'.

In a review of these three projects (Hock, 2011), my general aim was to introduce and locate Kele's art project in contemporary art discourse. Kele's project was subsequently acquired by the Ludwig Museum in Budapest. In this chapter, the themes of marriage and migration represented in the works of Kele, Ostojić and Oravec are revisited with the intention to explore their social-historical contexts as well as to contemplate upon facets of artistic and gender-based consciousness, personal and creative choices, including the selection and handling of media technology to communicate gender-related messages.

The above mentioned works of Kele, Ostojić and Oravec were brought together in the Dortmund edition of the international exhibition *Agents & Provocateurs* that I co-curated with Franciska Zólyom and Inke Arns in 2009 and 2010. The show surveyed certain forms of confrontation; agency and provocation, both framed as dissenting artistic attitudes. The exhibition explored whether agency and provocation have proved to be viable forms of protest in different and changing political contexts. *Agents & Provocateurs* juxtaposed artistic interventions emerging from Socialist Eastern Europe and more liberal democratic contexts. The aim was to map critical strategies and explore how effective these might be in addressing flaws in political systems. One sub-theme of the exhibition was entitled *Agency Gendered*. In that section, the private sphere and life strategies of artists were lined up as potential sites of resistance to the dominant social order. The section was designed in recognition of the fact that discussions of oppositional art in Socialist Central and Eastern Europe generally focused on confrontations in the public sphere, taking a critical stance against the infringements of civil rights, while giving less attention to aspects of control over private life.<sup>1</sup> Rather than setting a narrow focus on women's and men's imposed social roles, the majority of selected works in the *Agency Gendered* section focused on the intersection between gender roles and other aspects of a politicized identity. The action-documentation *Belgrade remembers...* (2001) by the Belgrade-based artist Milica Tomić problematized both the marginalization of the female protagonists of an anti-fascist past as well as the objectification of women in today's mass media, which continues to degrade the woman signifier into a mere spectacle. In a similar manner, Valie Export's *Tap and Touch*

---

<sup>1</sup> The show was on view in the Institute of Contemporary Art, Dunaújváros, Hungary, in October and November 2009 and in Hartware MedienKunstVerein in Dortmund, Germany from May to July 2010. For further information, see the website [www.agentsandprovocateurs.net](http://www.agentsandprovocateurs.net) and [www.hmkv.de](http://www.hmkv.de).

*Cinema* (Tapp and Tastkino, 1968) confronted the viewers with deeply ingrained sexist attitudes that characterized Austrian society in the post-war decades; attitudes that continue to be reified through contemporary visual culture. The Latvian-born artist, Andris Grinbergs's film *Self Portrait* 27 min (1972) presented an alternative, communal lifestyle surpassing the dictates of heterosexuality which continued to be prevalent at the time across Europe.<sup>2</sup> In *Agents & Provocateurs*, Judit Kele's *I Am a Work of Art* entered a dialogue with other pieces, undermining the traditional matrimonial bond. Besides Tanja Ostojić's work, the Polish-born, Berlin-based Ewa Partum's *Women, Marriage is Against You* (1980), exposed the limitations that the institution of marriage assigns to women within a masculine hetero-normative tradition. The performance text revealed how the romanticism of marriage clouds women's self-consciousness. In the same light, Partum claimed in her performance *Wedding Attire* (1981) that marriage is "a vestige of patriarchal culture and masculine civilization tying up women in obedience to their own false desires" (Stepken, 2001, 21). Like Kele's and Ostojić's works, other artists also addressed the coercive and restrictive forces of geo-political factors on the individual's life, as did Tímea Oravecz or Istvan Kantor (born in Hungary, currently based in Toronto). In his 35 min film entitled *The Never Ending Operetta* (2008), Kantor claims that he was shaped by the relocation experience, referring to the multiple adaptation techniques he developed in his life as a migrant.

### **Under deconstruction: *Mariage d'inclination***

Kele and Ostojić appropriated the institution of marriage as an artistic strategy and a means of social mobility with different connotations and subtexts. Judit Kele graduated in 1976 in Textile Design from the Budapest Academy of Applied Arts. In 1979, she presented the photography-based performance entitled *Textile without Textile*, in which she substituted her own naked body for the medium of the artwork by photographing herself as if her body was made of both the horizontal and vertical threads running through a loom. In the following year, she *de facto* placed herself as an artwork in her performance realized at the Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest. Commenting upon the ways women

---

<sup>2</sup> In the Central and Eastern Europe, the post-war and especially post-1968 West often is referred to as a site of general 'freedom' where both homo- and bisexual desires could be safely acted out. Among many others, Robert Corber (1997), Jonathan Katz (1976), and Lucy Robinson (2006) have chronicled atrocities against homosexuals in their respective countries of the so-called liberal West.

had been traditionally represented throughout art history, Kele composed herself into a beautiful spectacle, and spent three days sitting and living at the empty place of a painting on loan, behind a cordon, in the company of a security guard and in the context of other artwork (Figure 2.1).



Figure 2.1 Judit Kele, *I am A Work of Art*, 1979. Performance. Hungarian Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest. Courtesy of the artist

In 1980, Kele was an invited participant at the Paris Biennial where she prepared herself to be auctioned off as an art piece. Kele assumed that by selling herself as a work of art, she could find out what she was worth, and with this knowledge, she would be able to take a better care of her

own life. The bidders invited to the auction were selected from among respondents to a matrimonial ad that the artist had published in the French daily newspaper *Libération*. As the ad stated, through marriage, the artist hoped to gain more freedom of movement across the borders of Europe than was permitted at that time for Hungarian citizens. The posting read:

“Young and successful Eastern European female artist seeks gentleman for marriage. This marriage would enable her to freely move around and accompany her exhibitions in the West. In exchange, accommodation in her home country and local art contacts are offered. Respond to the following address... Meetings possible after 10<sup>th</sup> of July.” (Documentation, Judit Kele, *I am a Work of Art*, 1980, translated by Beata Hock)

Respondents were informed that the ad was a means to invite participants for an art action, taking the form of an auction. The item put up for auction was a period of ownership of the art piece, that is, Kele herself, depending on how much the bidder was willing to pay in Swiss Francs. This is how Judit Kele became the ‘property’ of a Frenchman. The new owner wanted to keep his acquisition by his side, which at the time was only possible if he married his far from freewheeling Eastern European ‘artwork’. The groom was a prominent member of the Parisian dance world, and a gay man. Thus, for him marrying a woman artist from Eastern Europe was an act that could advantageously pass in his raffish bohemian milieu, not to mention the tax reduction for which he became eligible. Initially, all parties involved, including Kele’s Hungarian husband, went along with the story with the brassy adventurousness characteristic of Action Art of that era, regarding the divorce and the new wedding as unplanned, but doable developments of the original performance plan. However, it turned out that the adventure, initially considered as an art-only project by a wife and both husbands soon penetrated into the sphere of real life and the cohabitation faltered before the contracted life-time expired. Nevertheless, Kele never returned to live in Hungary. When invited to participate in *Agents and Provocateurs* in 2009, the artist produced a new video of the same title in which she reflected upon the questions raised in the original performances, from the perspective of some thirty years. The 14 min film addressed the social-cultural mechanisms of value assignment, according to which aging conversely affects a work of art and female beauty. Three women of different generations bath in the fountain of youth, and their gentle same-sex bonding holds up the possibility of liberating them from the constraints of their relationships and the hetero-normative matrix.

Although the primary motives of Kele’s project were associated with a desire to gain mastery over her own life on the one hand, and an avant-

gardist drive to merge art and life on the other, it could be argued that reading her piece in the light of the history of love, sex, marriage and female self-realization can offer further interpretive facets, allowing to read her enterprise both from the perspective of cross-border mobility and as an act of disobeying normative gender regimes. Cultural historians (e.g. Haeberle, 1978; Murstein, 1974; Outhwaite, 1986) and, more recently, gender scholars (Mainardi, 2003; Pedersen. 2000; 2003; Rounding, 2003) have written at considerable length about the social status of women through time and across societies about the functioning of the marriage market, marriage strategies, as well as the social background of the partner selection process. Their most astounding disclosure for the contemporary individual rights-oriented general public may be that for the most of Western history, marriage was not just the union of two romantically involved and freely consenting individuals. To a considerable extent, marriage was considered as a purely economic arrangement, and thus, rather a business transaction arranged by families. Often even basic affection was not solicited. The Napoleonic Code of 1804 severely dispossessed married women, restricting their capacity to control their own assets, engage in financial transactions, or to keep their own wages.<sup>3</sup> As historians argue, some women opted to remain single in order to be able to retain independence and manage their property (Offen and Bell, 1983). The art historian Patricia Mainardi (2003) tracks how expectations about marriage were expressed in French visual culture and theatre in the 19th century. Mainardi recollects the elaborate terminology used to classify marital unions from *mésalliance* (marriage with a social inferior), to *mariage mal-assorti* (a mismatch), to *mariage d'inclination* (a union based on mutual affection) and *mariage de la raison* (a code name for an arranged marriage). Reviewing selected works of celebrated playwrights of the time, Mainardi records how perceptions about the relation between marriage and love changed during the Restoration era (1814-1830). The aristocratic audience that formed the essential part of theatre audiences before the French Revolution, proclaimed the importance of love and gladly entertained fantasies, fuelled by emerging Enlightenment concepts of the individual's right to happiness, and that love can even bring happiness to a *mésalliance*, an utter social disaster in reality. After the Revolution, however, the composition of the audience changed, and the predominantly bourgeois public was no longer curious about idealistic visions in which love, marriage and a mixture of social classes all

---

<sup>3</sup> *Code Napolen* was subsequently adopted by governments throughout Europe, and the restrictive legislation only started to change in response to feminist campaigns around the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries.

smoothly came together: instead, a sober and prosperous marriage became the preferred subject of bourgeois theatre.

By the second half of the 19 century, the world of the Parisian courtesan evolved, a sort of parallel world that existed beside mainstream, decent society. This evolution was partly aided by the financial expansion of the Second French Empire, and developed into a persisting myth. Émile Zola's novel *Nana*, Alexandre Dumas's play *La Dame aux Camélias*, Charles Baudelaire's poems in *Les Fleurs du Mal*, Auguste Clesinger's sculpture *Woman Bitten by a Snake*, or Giuseppe Verdi's opera *La Traviata*, all commemorated some of the most affluent and influential courtesans of the time. The novels of Colette,<sup>4</sup> especially the stories *Gigi* and *Chéri*, present a less glamorous layer of the *demi-monde*. Most 'un-propertied' women only had the prospect of marrying someone from their own rank, running a solid family business and nurturing a family with little hope of upward social mobility. Deprived of lawful means of agency in one of contemporary Europe's most misogynistic societies, some young women opted for another; they agreed to become an unmarried wealthy man's mistress until the man espoused his eligible woman. This was virtually the only way that offered them the opportunity of social mobility, sexual and (relative) financial independence.

Kele's action denaturalizes the cornerstone of contemporary hetero-normative social order, the *mariage d'inclination*, the alliance built upon a notion of romantic love. As Kele retrospectively formulated, she had refused to idolize the institution of marriage.<sup>5</sup> Instead, she looked at it as a potential means to thwart political restrictions imposed on the scope of her movement and professional development. In this respect, her artistic intervention delivers a challenge to normative gender regimes even if the artist's deconstructive operation was only partially premeditated. When placed in this peculiarly French historical perspective, responses to her ad seem to confirm that the marriage of convenience had long been perceived as an acceptable choice, especially in the context of economic or political pressure. Responding candidates repeatedly assured Kele of their sympathy for her initiative as the examples of the correspondence below demonstrate:

"Marriage can be about a lot of things, but this one would be a marriage of convenience above all, securing [your] liberty."

---

<sup>4</sup> Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette (1873-1954), French novelist.

<sup>5</sup> Beata Hock in interview with Judit Kele. Paris, July 7, 2009.

“I am 33 and ready to get involved in a marriage of convenience with you. This formality is without consequences and obligations for me, and if it enables me to get acquainted with new people, that is satisfactory. I give my consent on the condition that I will be charged with no extra expenses on account of this unselfish gesture.”

“I very much understand your problem.”

“Please, accept my application, but it might cause problems if you have a high income. Besides, a potential divorce has legal consequences in case one of the two parties demands their freedom back.”

(Documentation, Judit Kele, *I am a Work of Art*, 1980)

The lack of legitimate ways to master one’s own life in 19<sup>th</sup> century France resonates in Kele’s contemporary socio-political context; that is, two examples of the regimes exercising control over citizens’ private sphere and free movement.

In 2002, Kele made a biographical film about the American artist Jeff Koons. The motive of the fashionable and wealthy courtesans of late 19th century Paris, entertaining upper-class men and the literati of the period in their salons and seemingly also possessing a degree of societal influence, bears a striking resemblance to the flagrantly displayed glam world of Koons and his porn star and self-proclaimed politician wife, La Cicciolina. In a text written for the presentation of Kele’s project in the *Agents & Provocateurs* show, French art historian H el ene Chouteau (2009) highlighted Kele’s concerns regarding the merging of one’s art and life, the commercial value of an artist’s creative output, and the exaggerated mediatisation of a constructed artist-self.

More than the mere idea of advertising for a husband in the framework of an art project, it is precisely the deprivation of a lawful means of agency and cross-border mobility that creates a strong affinity between Kele’s *I am a Work of Art* and Ostojić’s *Looking for a Husband with EU Passport* (2000–2005) project.

In 2000, the Serbian artist Tanja Ostojić posted a photo of herself as part of an online advertisement (Figure 2.2). As Rune Gade (2009) reports, the ad was first published in the web-based magazine of the Serbian art space *Remont*, and later it migrated to the site of the Macedonian Contemporary Art Centre as part of the institution’s *Gender & Capital* project (Milevska, 2005). The photo showcased the image of a naked woman’s fully shaved frontal body. At the same time, the woman securely owned her gaze, self-consciously staring at whoever might be watching her. The following sentence was attached to the image: “Please



send your applications to hottanja@hotmail.com. Do not hesitate to contact me with any further questions or details.” (Tanja Ostojić, *Looking for a Husband with EU Passport, 2000-2005*)

As Ostojić writes in her artist’s statement, she exchanged over 500 letters with applicants from around the world, and summarizes her selection process as follows:

“Following a correspondence of six months with a German man, Klemens G, I arranged our first meeting as a public performance in the field in front of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade in 2001. One month later we officially married in New Belgrade. With the international marriage certificate and other required documents, I applied for a visa. After two months I got the entrance family unification visa for Germany, limited to three months, so I moved to Düsseldorf, where I lived for three and a half years. In spring 2005, my three-year permit expired, and instead of granting me a permanent residence permit, the authorities granted me a two-year visa. After that, K. G. and I got divorced, and on the occasion of the opening of my *Integration Project Office* installation at Gallery 35 in Berlin, on July 1, 2005, I organized the “Divorce Party.” (Documentation, Tanja Ostojić *Looking for a Husband with EU Passport, 2000–2005*)<sup>6</sup>

By posting her picture ad online, Ostojić followed the operational logic of the mail-order bride industry. Up to this point, as Gavarini comments, she could have been simply one of those seeking a way to shun immigration laws (Gavarini, 2011, 113). But her solicitation was carried out as a piece of contemporary performance art, framed by a critical theoretical stance, and the odd advertisement image signalled this *artificiality* to viewers familiar with the related discourses. This audience was also most likely to comprehend that Ostojić’s project does not only concern the artist’s individual life but her case stands for many others, all those aspiring for a legal immigrant status. Recently, I witnessed a series of email exchanges between a ‘real-life’ solicitor and potential suitors. The plea was sent around the circulation list of the higher education institution I was affiliated with at the time.

---

<sup>6</sup> This statement is a standard element of the installation.

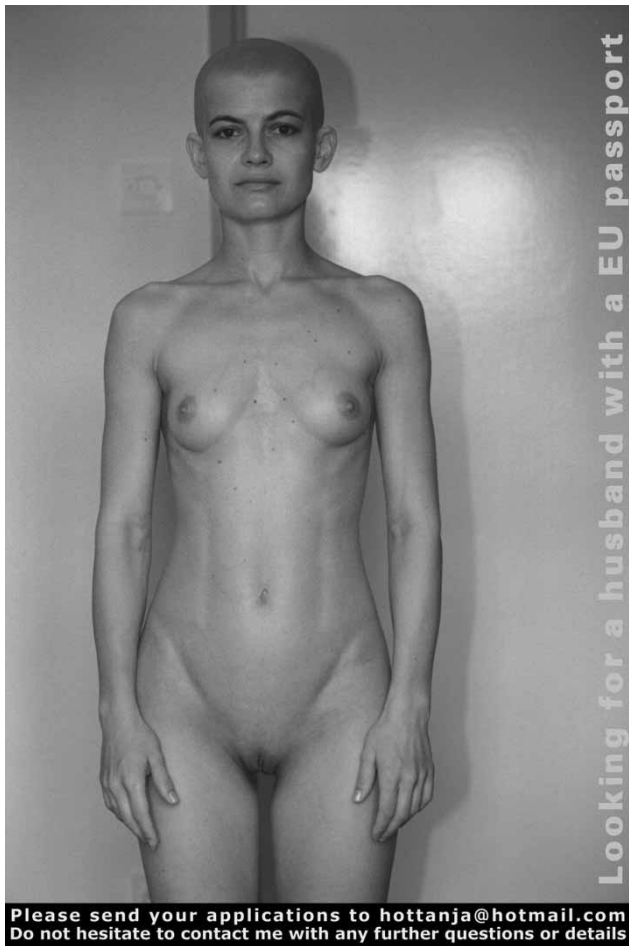


Figure 2.2 Tanja Ostojić, the ‘ad’. Participatory web project  
*Looking for a Husband with EU Passport*, 2000-2005.  
 Photograph: Borut Krajnc. Courtesy of the artist

The email read:

“Dear all,  
 can anyone marry me, since I would like to stay in Europe and my visa is  
 expiring on the 30 June [20xx]? I do not really have any gender  
 preferences, as long as it would help me to get a visa. I look forward to  
 hearing from you and to our future together. Cheers, [J]”

Willing responses ranged from prompt jovial proposals (“I hereby propose to marry you! What are the [local] laws concerning gay couples or pacts?”),<sup>7</sup> terse ones (“I can. And if you marry me you can stay in the beautiful country of Iran without visa. Does it help?”), and more elaborate advices not falling short of the kind of critical élan and irony also appearing in Ostojčić’s work:

“When extending offers like this, you might want to attach your picture [...] also its good to add your general skills in terms of potential for contributing to [...] It also helps if you write two or three different descriptions of yourself, perhaps in several languages [...] The more open ended and ambiguous your statements are, generally the likelihood of success [is] higher. In any case, marketing is everything.”

### Mobility narratives

Considering Kele’s and Ostojčić’s projects from the perspective of feminist intersectionality further expands in my view, the works’ interpretive horizon. While tackling the institution of marriage implicates the artist-performers’ gender, their Central Eastern European subject position equally structures their identity and actions. This latter dimension comes across in Kele’s piece in the context of Cold War Europe, and in Ostojčić’s work in post-Socialist, post-war Yugoslavia. Within Ostojčić’s oeuvre, *Looking for a Husband with EU Passport* is embedded in a group of performances that represent the perspective of the migrant woman, more specifically the overwhelmingly unequal relations between the institutions of the EU and individuals excluded from its administrative, professional or welfare networks. Both in *Looking for a Husband...* and in a widely known poster by Ostojčić entitled *After Courbet L’Origine du Monde* (2004), it is a woman who is prefigured as a potential victim of austere or more ‘consensual’ forms of trafficking. In *Looking for a Husband...* Ostojčić deliberately appropriates the *raisons d’être* of mail-order bride catalogues in an attempt to remind us that:

“Women’s bodies have been bought and sold to alleviate economic hardships throughout history; they have been used for punishment and war retribution, traded and trafficked across borders.” (Gavarini, 2011, 112)

---

<sup>7</sup> PACS: *pacte civil de solidarité* or civil solidarity pact, the registered partnership and cohabitation between two adults (same-sex or opposite-sex).

At the same time, authors writing about *Looking for a Husband...* (Gade 2008; Videkanic, 2010) repeatedly assert that Ostojić acts as a double agent who not only exposes the machinery of subjection and dependence but, through consciously exploiting them in order to literally advance her position, turns them into a means of self-empowerment. Some viewers, particularly feminist and critical stance oriented viewers, might find this conduct objectionable for obvious reasons (Gavarini, 2011, 123), and therefore it may be expedient to approach it in view of the artistic strategies of over-identification and subversive affirmation. These strategies call regimes of power into question by excessively and seemingly unscrupulously imitating the object of criticism. As it is noted from time to time, imitation alone, even if performed with an ironic distance, cannot be assumed to automatically undermine prevailing ideologies (Milevska, 2005); the affirmed concept needs to be in some way simultaneously exposed, and the performer needs to be caught in the action, so to say. Unlike most interpretations safely relying on the artist's own declarations about her practice and intentions, I dispute that the oddity of Ostojić's advertising image alone achieves the act of exposure. I find that interpretations of the image which stress its unattractiveness or plain lack of eroticism (Hoffmann, 2003; Milevska, 2005; Mokra 2010), and in a much more prudent formulation (Gavarini, 2011, 112) claim a contrast between the textual invitation and visual repulsion, in fact unadvisedly normalize conventional heterosexual desire. Contrary to these assumptions, some of the email replies carefully selected for the exhibition display and catalogue publication, express their amazement over Tanja's beauty and her sex appeal or seem compelled to respond with equally explicit imagery. I would at best suggest that the image along with the credit and copyright line, as it originally appeared on *Remont's* website, can be read as such an indication, as something out of place.

I also propose that an investigation taking both a historical and interdisciplinary perspective can offer further ways of getting to grips with Ostojić's sophisticated duplicity. Women's recourse to such dubious sources of strength as beauty and sexuality has been documented throughout history. Male authors, especially in earlier centuries, tended to assume a one-to-one correspondence between sensual wiles and women's purported moral inferiority. Women authors have on many occasions countered this view, revealing that the reason for devious manners has rather been associated with the paucity of 'authorized' ways of exercising agency. Christine de Pizan, one of Europe's first professional woman writers, touches upon this misogynist bias in her book *The Book of the City of Ladies*, written in years 1404 and 1405, while Elizabeth Wurtzel's pop-

post-feminist book entitled *Bitch* (1998) chronicles women from ancient to recent history who, so the author argues, very self-consciously unsubscribed to the rules of polite society.

Along similar lines, social scientists and legal experts have gone beyond just critiquing the services offered by the mail order-bride industry on account that, such services reify patterns of male ownership over disadvantaged women. These authors also ask to what degree the women entering international matchmaking are victims or agents following their so called free choice (Simons, 2001; Constable, 2003; D'Aoust, 2010). Reports from 'sending countries' list factors associated with the demographic imbalance between the number of available women and the number of men at particular locations, or the significant discrepancy between the life expectancy of the two sexes, which reduces women's marriage opportunities in their home countries. These reports are however silent about Western men's purchasing power over Eastern (or Southern) women. For better or worse, these considerations contribute to more layered readings of Ostojić's strategic appropriation of controversial social practices.

Hungarian-born, Berlin-based artist Tímea Oravecz constructs yet another contemporary narrative of social and professional mobility from the periphery to the centre(s) of Europe. In her narrative, the individual starting from the position of Europe's disadvantaged, as she points out 'Other within', is once again driven to rely on ambiguous practices in order to arrive. Oravecz started her studies at the Akademie der bildenden Künste in Vienna in 1998, before Hungary joined the European Union. Later on, she attended art schools in other European countries including Italy, Spain, and Germany, either as a matriculated student or as a long-term tourist. Meanwhile, Oravecz's native Hungary became part of an integrated and purportedly borderless European Union. Despite integration, acquiring the documents needed for a legal stay in the EU remained an exacting and time-intensive process. The arduous administrative process occasionally drove the artist to improperly present proofs of her permanent residence, bank accounts, or eligibility for social security provisions. The series *Time Lost* (2007-2008) displays administrative documents acquired over a period of nine years (including residence permits, visas, and passport stamps) in embroidered patterns (Figure 2.3).

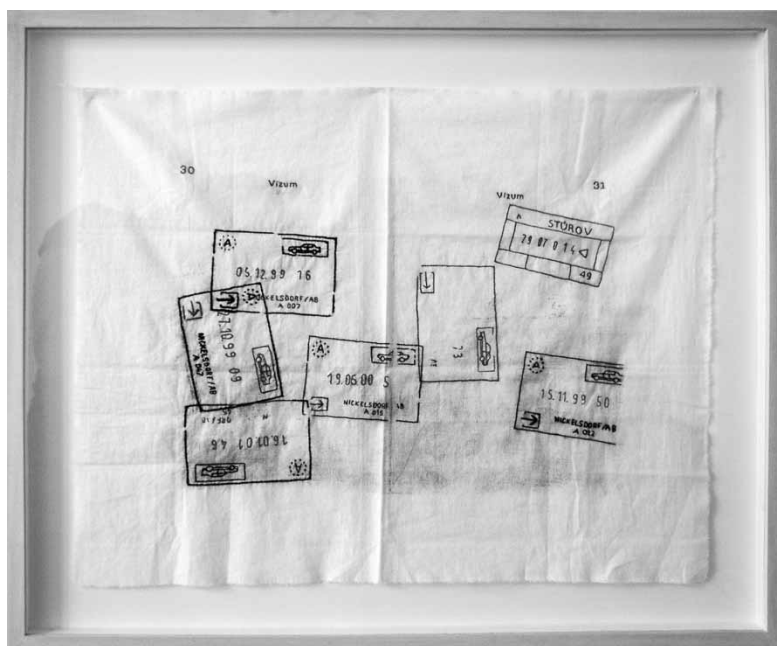


Figure 2.3 Timea Oravecz, from the series *Time Lost (Nr II)*, 2007.  
Embroidery on textile. Courtesy of the artist

Oravecz stitched every tiny letter, code, stamp and signature as they appeared in the administrative forms she collected. The same subject was picked up in her video-installation entitled *Cosmopolitan* (2009), where in three films and in three different languages, Hungarian, Italian and German, the artist exposed the difficulties of changing her residence from one country to another. She dispassionately listed the kind of detours that self-contradictory regulations within the EU have compelled her to commit.

As her experience shows, some sort of a productivity bias creates a situation in which the free movement in labour markets is only conveniently regulated for those who serve the economy, and the endeavours of an emerging artist fall outside this category. The precarious working and living conditions of the creative class that Oravecz addresses here have been discussed in the artistic centres of Europe in recent years. For instance, the activity of the Berlin-based group *Haben und Brauchen*, researches the economic aspects of the cultural and creative industries (among others, Grüner et al. 2009; Weckerle et al., 2008). Oravecz consciously

supplements this discussion with the perspective of those who do not belong to the European Union's dominant nations, and thus, are often doubly marginalized. Although the Cold War has been over for some time now, as film scholar Dina Jordanova (2003) points out:

“after the West won the propaganda battle over the hearts and minds of people in the Eastern Block, the culture of the East remains as little known in the West as before” (16).

### **Choice of media: Artistic and female consciousness**

The works by Judit Kele, Tanja Ostojić and Tímea Oravecz that I have discussed here are all multimedia projects; they combine performative elements, objects, photographs, originals or copies of official documents and private letters, self-made artist books, embroidery, documentary, video art and Web use. Now, I will explore how the particular choice of medium contributes to the meaning produced in the work.

In the marriage projects by Kele and Ostojić, the transformation of the channels of communication sets the two works apart. Within Kele's relatively short trajectory as a performance artist, *I am A Work of Art* is an extraordinarily daring type of body art; the artist not only exposed her physical body but her entire existence to an unforeseeable process. This act may even call for a new genre designation, and my suggestion would be perhaps social-body art. Both as a woman and a young performance artist, Kele boldly nose-dived into an increasingly self-propelling chain of events. She acted upon impulses and often was not fully aware of their consequences. Today, Kele describes these happenings as she, at the end, became the victim of her own making. The degree, to which life events and the art project indeed merged in the case of her project, complicates the analysis of Kele's example because it is unclear where the durational performance really ended and when it faded into a personal history narrative. Ostojić's reviewers rightly claim that the fields of the aesthetic, the symbolic and the real overlap in *Looking for a Husband....* Nevertheless, it would be unwise to deny the degree of personal, artistic and critical consciousness in Ostojić's practice. Unlike Kele, Ostojić confidently controlled the situation all the way through, keeping the affair within the confines of an art project. All quasi-public events of the five-year process, including the initial posting of the advertisement and the concluding divorce party, were carried out under the auspices of art institutions or galleries.

Kele followed the advice of her local contacts and chose the *Libération* to place her ad. At the turn of the 1970s and 1980s, the *Libération* was a

daily paper with a clearly leftist orientation, popular with open-minded people and radical thinkers, as Kele had been informed. It seems she had a good chance to find a responsive audience. Furthermore, Ostojić's choice to place her ad on the World Wide Web deserves revisiting. In media theory, the Internet is often heralded as a guileless, even liberating medium where physical borders become irrelevant, and marginality and subalternity no longer exist. The liberating potential of the global network seems to be reinforced by the institution of international matchmaking, the kind of web-based practice that Tanja Ostojić subversively affirmed or over-identified with. For many brides from developing countries the Internet is a means to reach beyond the borders of their home countries and find their target group: web-user Western men. Feminist media art theorist Maria Fernández (1999) discloses the fallacy of this utopian universalism assigned to Internet that tends to obscure the existence of material and educational inequalities across the globe as well as the relevance of embodied subjection. Internet bride services where Western clients actively select brides from developing countries exploit just exactly those geopolitical inequalities and forms of subjections that social media theorists' utopian visions often overlook.

Kele's sober text-only classified ad mostly elicited a reserved respectful tone in the responses. Many of the handwritten replies came from men who offered her their help out of what might be called leftist comradeship and, rather than requesting a photo of the future bride, inquiring about her looks or any other personal details, the respondents communicated their political affiliation and views on the project of socialism, or expressed their attitudes toward an Eastern European subject. These ranged from idle curiosity, appended quotes from Marx or Hegel, to intriguing narratives of pro-leftist cultural activism in France. An extract of the letter from Michel M reads:

"I work as a special needs teacher in the Dijon region. I write a lot and sometimes paint. We recently founded the Dijon branch of A.I.D.A. (International Agency for the Protection of Artists) and we are planning various events for the beginning of the semester. We managed to convene 300 people on our first evening in the spring for a reading of Vaclav Havel's texts, featuring Irina Breskine (I'm not sure about the correct spelling!) as a guest, and we also screened a film about Soviet nonconformist painting. There was also a reading of Laahbi's texts, and classical music from Uruguay; latter country keeps one of its renowned musicians in prison. Five imprisoned or silenced artists in one night." (Documentation, Judit Kele, *I am a Work of Art*, 1980)



By contrast, very few of Ostojić's respondents appeared privy to her political critique. It is hard to decipher whether a particular tone emerges from the selection of letters the artist incorporated in her installation and the *Wedding Book* (an album containing all the documentation related to the matrimony), or whether the critical overtones were discharged by the sexual aura of the advertisement's image. From this second supposition follows the question whether over-identification and affirmation was indeed subversive in its effect? "From a materialist feminist perspective", Jill Dolan argues, "the female body is not reducible to a sign free of connotation" (1987, 160). An artist may declare to have appropriated a given visual sign, the nude in this case, for her subversive purposes, but that sign will not be self-evidently freed from the connotations it has acquired over time. Trading on the allures of femininity is absent from Oravec's migration narrative; the younger artist does not fall back on feminine charm or attractiveness as part of her 'strategies of success.' *Strategies of Success* is the title of a publication covering *The Curators Series*, a number of performance pieces in which Ostojić explored the often sexualized relation between curators and female artists (Ostojić, 2004).

Since gender does not figure as an organizing force in Oravec's oeuvre, questions interrogating the artist's feminist consciousness are not exactly applicable. Oravec is not unaware of gender discourses in contemporary art, but when she refers to femininity in her work, she does not politicize her private narrative. She frequently uses embroidery, weaving or other types of textile work, but this is rather an affinity for handicraft in general than a tribute to an early feminist elevation of traditional forms of women's creativity. *Trousseau Box* (2009) is a video installation featuring a wooden container, a copy of folk craftsmanship that was used in earlier centuries for storing the dowry of a young woman. This collection of clothing, bedding and utensils was the woman's dowry for a new household. Instead of real tangible objects, Oravec's box contains an LCD screen projecting a slide show of all her belongings. This quasi-anthropological survey reflects upon the changing conditions and attributes of becoming a woman. Her survey is communicated in an equally modernized language: a multitude of digitally projected images replacing actual objects and highlighting the significant increase of items that a young woman in the 21st century tends to possess.

Oravec is acutely aware of other identity issues: her Central European origin is exposed in *Time Lost* and *Cosmopolitan*, while several works such as for instance *Panorama* (2002) or *Socreality* (2003) narrate the artist's mobility history from the perspective of her working class

background. The mixed media installations *The Reason You Are not Flying is Because You Don't Think You Can Fly* (2005) and *Monument* (2008) poetically aggrandize her leap from a bleak housing estate on Budapest's periphery to the art schools and residency programs of Vienna, Venice, Granada, Berlin or New York. The three screens of the video installation *Cosmopolitan* are placed in such a way that the sounds of the simultaneously running narratives melt into a cacophony, conveying the feeling of befuddlement over the discrepancy between the proclaimed liberty of the EU-citizens and the artist's own frustrating experience.

In 1985, Kele stopped working as a visual artist and took to filmmaking, which partly explains why her scarcely recorded works and performances, including *I Am a Work of Art*, remained largely unknown even to local art historians. When the piece was reconstructed in the framework of the exhibition *Agents and Provocateurs* in 2009, she agreed that the retrieved material (original letters, wedding photos, an artist book, blown-up black-and-white prints of the performances, as well as a documentary interview footage, and an art video) be arranged in a relatively arid presentation to best set off their documentary value and to least archive a project so vitally merging art and life (Figure 2.4).

*Looking for a Husband...* has a standard display, carefully designed down to the hue of the wall paint (see Centrefold). The installation includes professionally mounted C-prints of the entry visas, event documentation, and emails with attached images. Comprehensively structured presentation of these everyday items creates an uncomfortable mismatch between Ostojić's institutional critical stance and the subservience to the formalism and professionalism that institutionalized or marketable mainstream art appreciates (Gržinić and Ostojić, 2009).



Figure 2.4 Judit Kele, *I am a Work of Art*, 1979–1980.  
Installation view, Institute of Contemporary Art, Dunaújváros, Hungary, 2009.  
Photograph: @Miklos Klotz.

## Conclusions

A central question of this volume is whether and how video, digital and new media have impacted on artists' engagement with issues of gender in their work across Central and Eastern Europe. Given the nature of the material I have engaged, namely that one of the works predates the new media era while none of the works prioritize gender, my text responds to this query somewhat, in a less direct way. I have analysed how the choice and the inherent qualities of the particular artistic media impact meanings produced in the discussed works. I have also outlined transformations in both artistic and female identities and consciousness. Although both the particular uses of media, including pre-digital 'old' and new technologies, as well as the gendered subject-matter are important elements in these projects, they are not intimately, necessarily, or causally linked. There are, at the same time, other issues meaningfully linking the projects by Kele, Ostojić and Oravecz to the overall purpose of the volume. The artists all critically address the division of Europe into centres and peripheries and comment upon the concomitant tensions between a globalising art scene and local or regional concerns. Both Ostojić's and Oravecz's pieces relate the in-between experiences of

diaspora artists, writers and theorists, while the question of how art as an institution frames or does not frame certain practices is especially prominent in Kele's and Ostojić's projects. The examples of works analysed in this chapter lend themselves to a kind of critical analysis that does not so much rehearse a set of well identifiable feminist topics in relation to newer art production practice but rather offers a perspective. Feminist intersectionality is part of this perspective as these examples require a framework that is able to reckon with the multiple layers of identity construction, and regards feminist discourse rather as a tool to facilitate a critique and resist normative gendered identities.

### Bibliography

- Chouteau, Hélène. 'I Am a Work of Art' par Judit Kele. Manuscript, 2009
- Constable, Nicole. *Romance on a Global Stage: Pen Pals, Virtual Ethnography, and "Mail Order" Marriages*. University of California Press, 2003
- Corber, Robert. *Homosexuality in Cold War America: Resistance and the Crisis of Masculinity* Duke University Press, 1997.
- D'Aoust, Anne-Marie. 'Circulation of Desire: The Security Governance of the International 'Mail-Order Brides' Industry' In *Security and Global Governmentality: Globalization, Governance and the State*, Miguel de Larrinaga and Marc Doucet (Eds.), London: Routledge, 2010. 113-131
- Dolan, Jill. 'The Dynamics of Desire: Sexuality and Gender in Pornography and Performance'. *Theatre Journal* 39(2): 156-74. 1987.
- Fernández, Maria. 'Postcolonial Media Theory' *Art Journal* 58(3): 58-73. 1999
- Gade, Rune. 'Making Real; Strategies of Performing Performativity in Tanja Ostojić's *Looking for a Husband with EU Passport*', In Gržinić Marina and Tanja Ostojić (Eds.) *Integration Impossible? The Politics of Migration in the work of Tanja Ostojić*. Argobooks: Berlin, 2009. 201-22
- Hock, Beata. 'Agency Gendered: Deconstructed Marriages and Migration Narratives in Contemporary Art', *Art Margins* [online], July 2011 <http://artmargins.com/index.php/2-articles/636--marriages-and-migration-in-art>.
- Gavarini, Jehanne-Marie. 'Intimate Passports: The Subversive Performances of Tanja Ostojić'. *Aspasia: The International Yearbook of Central, Eastern, and South-Eastern European Women's and Gender History* 5: 112-127. 2011

- Grüner, Herbert, Helene Kleine, Dieter Puchta & Klaus P Schulze (Eds.) *Kreative gründen anders! Existenzgründungen in der Kulturwirtschaft. Ein Handbuch*. Bielefeld: 2009.
- Gržinić, Marina and Tanja Ostojić (Eds.) *Integration Impossible? The Politics of Migration in the work of Tanja Ostojić*. Berlin: Argobooks, 2009.
- Haerberle, Erwin. *The Sex Atlas*. Rev. Ed. New York: The Continuum, 1978.
- Hoffmann, Justin. 'In Search of Balkania', *Praesens*, 1: 47-50. 2003.
- Iordanova, Dina. *Cinema of the Other Europe: The Industry and Artistry of East Central European Film*. London: Wallflower. 2003
- Katz, Jonathan. *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the USA*. New York: Avon Books, 1976.
- Mainardi, Patricia. *Husbands, Wives, and Lovers: Marriage and its Discontents in Nineteenth-Century France*. Yale University Press, 2003
- Milevska, Suzana. 'Objects and Bodies: Objectification and Over-Identification in Tanja Ostojić's Art Projects', *Feminist Review* 81: 112-118. 2005.
- Mokre, Monika. Looking for a Husband with a EU Passport: Diskriminierung in der Europäischen Union im Werk der serbischen Künstlerin Tanja Ostojic. *aep informationen: Feministische Zeitschrift für Politik und Gesellschaft*, 2010. Accessed January 24, 2012 <http://aep.at/heft/stories/81>
- Murstein, Bernard. *Love, Sex and Marriage through the Ages*, New York: Springer, 1974.
- Offen, Karen and Susan Groag Bell (Eds.) *Women, the Family, and Freedom: The Debate in Documents, 1750-1950*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1983.
- Ostojić, Tanja (Ed) *Strategies of Success. Curators Series 2001–2003*. Belgrade: SKC, 2004.
- Outhwaite, R.B. (Ed). *Marriage and Society: Studies in the Social History of Marriage*. London: Europa Publications, 1981.
- Outhwaite, R. B. 'Marriage as Business: Opinions on the Rise in Aristocratic Bridal Portions in Early Modern England'. In Neil McKendrick and R. B. Outhwaite (Eds.) *Business Life and Public Policy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986. 21-37
- Pedersen, Jean Elisabeth. 'Nana and the Nation: French Cultural Studies and Interdisciplinary Work'. In Marie-Pierre Le Hir and Dana Strand (Eds.) *French Cultural Studies: Criticism at the Crossroads*, State University of New York Press, 2000. 29-48

- Pedersen, Jean Elisabeth. *Legislating the French Family: Feminism, Theatre, and Republican Politics, 1870-1920*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2003.
- Pizan, Christine de. *The Book of the City of Ladies*. Transl. Rosalind Brown-Grant. London, New York: Penguin Books, 1999. (Originally written in 1404-1405)
- Robinson, Lucy. 'Three Revolutionary Years: The Impact of the Counter Culture on the Development of the Gay Liberation Movement in Britain' *Cultural and Social History* 3(4): 445-471. 2006
- Rounding, Virginia. *Grande Horizontales: The Lives and Legends of Four Nineteenth-Century Courtesans*. New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2003.
- Simons, Lisa Anne. *Marriage, Migration, and Markets: International Matchmaking and International Feminism* PhD Dissertation, University of Denver, 2001. Accessed January 30, 2012  
<http://www.usaimmigrationattorney.com/images/MarriageMigrationMarkets.pdf>
- Stepken, Angelika. 'Monograph', In Angelika Stepken (Ed) *Ewa Partum 1965-2001* Catalogue, Karlsruhe: Badischer Kunstverein, 2001.
- Videkanić, Bojana. 'Tanja Ostojić's Aesthetics of Affect and Post Identity' *ARTMargins online*, September, 2009  
<http://www.artmargins.com/index.php/2-articles/414-tanja-ostojis-aesthetics-of-affect-and-postidentity-series-qnew-critical-approachesq>
- Weckerle, Christoph, Manfred Gerig and Michael Söndermann. *Creative Industries Switzerland: Facts, Models, Culture*. Transl. L. Bruce. Basel: Birkhäuser, 2008
- Wurtzel, Elizabeth. *Bitch: In Praise of Difficult Women*. New York: Doubleday, 1998.

## CHAPTER THREE

# DE/CONSTRUCTING BALKAN MASCULINITIES: LOCAL TRADITION AND GENDER REPRESENTATION IN VIDEO INSTALLATION ART IN THE REGION

JOSIP ZANKI

### **Introduction**

This chapter explores the relationship between the construction of a gender order and the role of tradition in the former Yugoslavia and Western Balkan countries. Contemporary representation of hetero-normative masculinity is examined drawing on examples of video and installation work by artists from the region.

The following works will be discussed: Marijan Crtalić's *Living Dead* (2006), Marko Marković's *Fine Embroidery* (2011), Nebojša Šerić Šoba's *Monument to the International Community* (2007), Arion Asllani's *Boobs Boulevard* (2008) and Marina Abramović's *Balkan Erotic Epic* (2005). The selected artists explore gender construction, and in particular, comment on discourses of masculinity and masculine identity constructions situated within social, religious and political systems across the region. The works selected are video and photography-based, used as a documentation tool and as a means of artistic stylization.

Socialist Yugoslavia, formed in 1945 after the Second World War, was unable to transform into a democratic society. While countries of the then Eastern Block embarked on the socio-economic and political transformation that commenced in 1989 (after the fall of the Berlin Wall), Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina separated from the Yugoslav Federation. This separation instigated the Yugoslav wars that swept across the region between 1991 and 1995. In 1995, the Dayton agreement formally ended the conflict by recognising the borders of the

Republic of Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. These political developments in the Western Balkans led to a strengthening of national sentiments that rely mainly on traditionally formed gender constructions. Indeed, these events that fired up the construction of national and gender identities across the Balkans are those that mark the split of the ideological bond between Tito, Stalin and the Yugoslav ‘Third Way’ discourse. After an ideological split with the Eastern Bloc in 1948, Socialist Yugoslavia adopted the so-called self-managed Socialism in place of State Socialism.

The difference between State Socialism and self-managed Socialism of the Yugoslav type was in the workers’ right to manage the institutions and companies they worked in. In Yugoslavia at that time, workers’ councils were superior in authority to the director, and they represented the pillar of social ownership. Workers’ councils replaced both the councils of elders of the Slavic clan system and the village-based elders system under early Capitalism in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (1918-1941). During Socialism, despite the movement for the emancipation of women in Yugoslavia, led by the Women’s Antifascist Front, men occupied the management roles.

Ivica Župan is a writer and an art critic examining the beginnings of the avant-garde movement in Socialist Yugoslavia. In his book entitled *Pragmatists, Dogmatists, Dreamers* (2007), he deconstructs Yugoslav society and culture, starting with the break from Socialist realism through the formation of the EXAT 51 art group in 1950. The group was active until 1956, and its aim was to synthesize all forms of artistic expression resisting the legacy of Socialist realism. He argues that EXAT 51 represents an example of a local formation based on the Western cultural model. Župan also points out that the revolution in art, the end of Socialist realism and re-establishment of modernism in the region, were marked by experimental practice. He argues that:

“[o]penness towards the new and the avant-garde in international artistic practice, as well as the restoration of the relationship between national pre-war and post-war artistic modernism merely served as an aesthetic masking device for the totalitarianism that the ruling elites continued to practice.” (2007, 19)

In the years between 1945 and 1990, the most important members of all artistic institutions and groups belonged to the Central Communist Union’s organisations. The avant-garde art movements were inaugurated as state art and they were visual evidence of Yugoslavia’s ‘Third Way’ between the East and the West. All the art organizations, museums, galleries, as well as the acquisition of artworks, were financed from the state budget, which enabled the state to have a total control over the



artists' activity, despite the stylistic differences of their works. After an active involvement in the Second World War, one of the most important prominent Yugoslavian artists, Edo Murtić, was appointed as the Head of Propaganda for the President of the Croatian Government. As an active member of the Communist Party he was able to travel. In 1951, he went to the USA where he familiarised himself with the work of Jackson Pollock. Subsequently, he inaugurated the abstract art movement across Yugoslavia.

Many of the emerging avant-garde artists in Socialist Yugoslavia who are now internationally known, such as Marina Abramović, Sanja Iveković, Braco Dimitrijević, Mladen Stilinović, come from state officials and 'red bourgeoisie' families. These artists belonged to the circles of the established cultural elite. Hence, they were allowed to experiment with no fear of prosecution.

Marina Abramović's father was a Second World War national hero, and her mother was a major in the Yugoslav army. In her biographical film *The Star*, Abramović talks about how she joined the Communist Party in 1966 (Coulibeuf, 1999). Yugoslav Socialism was not immune to nepotism, nor did it follow the Soviet principle where fathers and sons could be class-based enemies, thus an idea of kinship also implied a political protection in Yugoslavia.

Following the break-up of Yugoslavia in 1991, in the newly formed countries of Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Macedonia, the existing Communist ideological model was transformed into a confluence of nationalism and religious conservatism. Simultaneously, independent political activists and civil society groups emerged across the region, publicly opposing the dominant ideology, while simultaneously extending its influence among what can be referred to as the consumerist masses (Hardt and Negri, 2000).

Different civil and non-governmental groups started to organize themselves during the war in the 1990s, and especially in the post-war period, when the political narratives appropriated war events to create new national ideologies (built on blood and ashes). However, the majority of civil organizations and activities were organized by the same 'clannish' principle, thus copying the nationalist model. The examples of this type of activity are the festivals in Zagreb, which host world-famous philosophers such as Slavoj Žižek or Gayatri Spivak, funded by the government in Zagreb. The mass truly becomes only a consumer of culture.

It could be argued that contemporary art in the former Yugoslav countries, after the 1990s, continued to follow the dogmatic political patterns that were dominant across the region since the Second World War. Several artists in the former Yugoslavia refused to adopt the

language of nationalist narratives, and replaced the language of the Socialist avant-garde state art with the engaged activist-type art. This activist dogma was the only route that was recognized by the international foundations, and by the Arts Councils within the federation's ministries of culture which allocated money to that kind of art. This created an absurd situation in which the majority of so called engaged art was financed precisely by the mechanism it was supposed to criticise.

It could be argued that different levels of cultural determinism have governed the production of contemporary art in the former Yugoslav region over the last twenty years. Diverse cultural matrices, from which artistic aesthetics locally evolved, are marked by the intertwining of the patriarchal, tribal heritage of the Dinaric region, the local religious heritage and the national myths as well as the political conflicts and the Imperial colonial influences. In the Dinaric region, the patriarchal clan system has survived to this day, which is notable in the cronyism of the political elite, as well as reflected, in the mass culture.

Across Serbia and Croatia, large scale folklore nationalist gatherings are held, aimed to rehabilitate the position of quilting groups from the Second World War (Ravna gora, Čavoglave). These gatherings are based on the patriarchal iconography of 'Blood and Soil', but also on aesthetics within the rules of the society of the spectacle (Debord, 1967/1984). Artists such as Marijan Crtalić, who grew up in the small town of Sisak, or Marko Marković, who grew up in Osijek, witnessed not only the traditional patriarchal macho culture, but also its revival in the 1990s. In the cities such as Zagreb or Belgrade such matrices survived not only in working class suburbs in which the inhabitants from rural areas settled during post-war industrialization, but also among the intellectual elites. Traditional constructs were also preserved during Socialism in which Marina Abramović and Nebojša Šerić Šoba grew up. Socialist Yugoslavia was called the land of workers, peasants and *inteligencia*, which clearly shows that it was based on traditional values.

Claude Levi-Strauss (1962) argues that we can understand indigenous influences only if we reactivate indigenous and home-grown thought processes by using cultural relics. He refers to Evans-Pritchard's research on the Azande people and witchcraft. According to Evans-Pritchard, the Azande people believed that accidents can be caused by a combination of witchcraft and natural forces. Levi-Strauss refers to a particular example associated with the collapse of a granary where although the Azande seemed to recognise that natural circumstances that might have led to the accident, the collapse of the granary roof, they also believed that witchcraft might have been in force. In fact, the supports holding up the

granary roof were eaten by termites, and the roof collapsed, killing a member of the tribe who was taking shelter under this roof.

When Marina Abramović describes the ritual of exposing the female genitals to the rain in her video work *Balkan Erotic Epic* (2005), she does not explain whether it is the intervention or a coincidence that the soil becomes more fertile during this process.

Levi-Strauss (1962) argues the importance of cultural determinism:

“The first difference between magic and science is therefore that magic postulates a complete and all-embracing determinism. Science, on the other hand, is based on a distinction between levels: only some of these admit forms of determinism; on other levels the same forms of determinism are held not to apply.” (Levi-Strauss 1962, 24)

In order to grasp influences in contemporary developments in artistic production in the Western Balkans, it is important to shed light on local tradition, including folk tales, legends and magic rituals. We will consider Bruno Latour’s paradigm associated with ethnological inquiry in order to examine the images that define Balkan spaces. Images that define the Balkan space are the images of male warriors, macho criminals, female fertility compared to a fertile soil, etc. Bruno Latour (1993) astutely recognises that:

“When our ethnology tries to explain to its informants that they should be more careful to separate the world as such from its social perception, they are either astonished or do not understand. In this anger and misunderstanding ethnology finds the very proof of their pre-modern obsession.” (Latour, 1993, 104)

Masculinity and its representations are amongst the most complex traditionally determined cultural constructions in the former Yugoslav societies. In order to understand these determinants, we must enter the space of the so-called mythological worldview which has its origin in the very formation of the Slavic ethnicities.

Apart from the Albanian minority, the Western Balkans and the former Yugoslav region are almost entirely populated by Southern Slavs. Slavic ethnicities are classified into three distinct groups: Eastern, Western and Southern Slavs. According to the historical sources (Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos’s *On the Governance of the Empire/ De administrando imperio*), the Southern Slavs settled in the Western Balkans between the 6<sup>th</sup> and the 9<sup>th</sup> century. They migrated from the area of modern day Ukraine. Upon arrival in the Balkans, the tribal communities formed self-

determined ethnicities of Croats and Serbs, and, after converting to Christianity, established the church-authorised kingdoms and duchies.

It was not until the 19<sup>th</sup> century that Croats or Serbs turned into nations, during the so-called national revivals; that is, in the same period when other European nations, such as Germany and Italy were formed. The creation of Croatian and Serbian nations in the 19<sup>th</sup> century is related to the Southern Slavs' idea. Thus, during the formation of the official Croatian language, a dialect of Croats from Herzegovina was chosen as the official language, which was identical to the dialect of Serbs from Herzegovina. Although the processes of modernization took place almost at the same time as in other European regions, the elements of clan-based organization and tribal rules have survived in the Balkans. Dominant constructions of masculinity also survived.

The work of two Croatian scholars, an ethnologist Vitomir Belaj (2007) and a classical philologist and Slavic expert Radoslav Katičić (2010) explored the foundations of the mythological worldview in the region. Belaj and Katičić reconstructed forgotten Slavic myths, using Kiev annuals from the year circa 1113, drawing on the research of the Russian scholars Vjeceslav Ivanov and Vladimir Toporov, as well as their own research on legends, folk songs and customs of Slavic and Baltic countries.

For instance, early Slavic religious beliefs were based on the fertility myth and the construction of the dominant masculinity of the supreme god Perun. The Slavic religious system was represented by the World Tree (axis mundi), an oak tree with a golden eagle perched on the top branch, surrounded by nine small eagles and a cuckoo bird. The eagle represented the god Perun, the nine small eagles were his sons, and the cuckoo bird was his only daughter, Morana (Belaj, 2007). Such a genealogical representation demonstrates the importance of a dominant masculine construction in the Slavic myths; the female exists as the bearer of fertility in a male world.

Remnants of these old beliefs have survived among the Slavs not only in the form of legends, folklore and customs, but also in their relation to nature, space and time. In the Western Balkans, these influences are particularly persistent; they survived despite regional wars and changing forms of state organisations. Local customs survived for geographical reasons in particular, due to the remoteness of certain communities, particularly those located in the mountainous regions. A tradition-based mythology worldview is one of the foundations of the dominant sexual and gender constructions, often explored by artists in the region.

In Serbian and Croatian traditional culture, the main celebration of nature's fertility is linked with Jurjevo Đurđevdan. The Holiday of Sveti

Juraj, Jurjevo is celebrated on April 23rd. Orthodox believers celebrate the identical holiday Đurđevdan on May 6th. Many customs are related to the holiday and are a celebration of the birth of vegetation and the fertility of the land (foliage turns green after the winter). This celebration is based on the legend of Green George, to which Marina Abramović referred in her video work *Balkan Erotic Epic* (discussed in detail later on).

Having introduced the socio-political context and having discussed the mythological underpinnings of identity construction in the Western Balkans, I will now examine the examples of artistic representations of hetero-normative masculinity. I will discuss examples of contemporary video and installation works created over the past twelve years in the region in order to highlight the ways, in which local artists explore dominant masculine archetypes and the culturally constructed gender order.

### **The Living Dead**

Croatian artist Marijan Crtalić works with local tradition, folk tales and legends and produces videos and performances questioning identity construction. In his performative practice, he engages with a particular borderline space, oscillating between the so-called ‘normal’ state of mind and madness. Since his childhood, Crtalić has collected numerous archaeological artefacts from the Kupa River area, around his hometown of Sisak. In his practice, he uses archaeological findings from his collection and his own body as a medium. For the installation entitled *Living Dead (Globalization of Subconscious)* (2006), Crtalić made a sculpture reminiscent of a tennis ball (Figure 3.1). As material for the sculpture, he used his own hair and sebaceous fluid from his scalp, as he referred to “a grey greenish mud that quickly covers the whole scalp” (Crtalić cited in Ostojić, 2009). In order to make this work, every morning for over four years Crtalić applied oil on his head, and scraped the formed tallow from his scalp. Subsequently, he re-layered the tallow ‘dough’ onto his freshly shaven head, and ‘wore’ it as a wig, covering his baldness. The installation (Figure 3.2) features the object as well as a video that documents the process of making of the sculpture. In the installation arrangement, the sculpture is displayed in a glass cabinet, placed on top of a white pedestal. Alongside the sculpture, the video shows his daily ritual of collecting tallow. Video technology is used to document the creation of the artist’s cult of identity, erasing the border between the real and the performative.

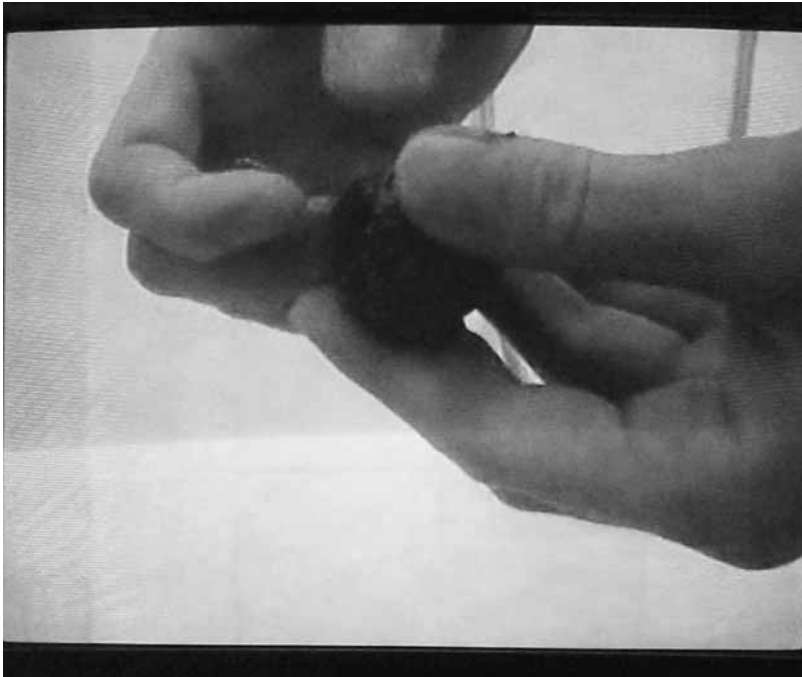


Figure 3.1 Marijan Crtalić, *Living Dead (Globalization of Subconscious)*, 2006.  
Video installation. Video still. Courtesy of HDLU, Photo Archive, Zagreb

The Museum of Contemporary Art offered to acquire *Living Dead (Globalization of Subconscious)*, yet Marijan Crtalić decided to keep this work in his own collection of curiosities. Reviewing Crtalić's retrospective in 2007 at the Gallery Striegl in Sisak, art historian Ivana Mance wrote:

“Crtalić is obsessed with borders; from sexuality and death as the basic existential experiences of transgression, the mechanisms of their social regulation through suppression, taboo, convention; to the notorious structural differentiations that ground the collective, such as interior and exterior, organic and inorganic, nature and culture, body and technology, male and female, dream and reality” (Mance, 2008).



Figure 3.2 Marijan Crtalić, *Living Dead (Globalization of Subconscious)*, 2006.  
Installation view. Courtesy of HDLU, Photo Archive Zagreb

In order to facilitate understanding of Crtalić's approach to art production, I draw on the theoretical propositions of Suzana Marjanić, an ethnologist whose research deals with the ritual aspects of contemporary art in the former Yugoslavia. She offers numerous examples from folk tradition and oral history, referring to a *mora* (nightmare); an example of a supernatural being in Slavic tradition, assuming an animal form. Zoo-psycho-navigation as the principle of transformation or a term explaining a process of embodying the other, seem to be realised according to dominant male or female gender constructs. Male psycho-navigation in Crtalić's work is associated with a process of semen production. It seems that the sebaceous fluid from his scalp acts as the 'semen' of his subconscious. According to various shamanic teachings, precisely the products of the human body represent alchemic materials that enable the transformation of the human consciousness. As the bee produces honey, the human body produces thought, as well as sebaceous fluid and other secretions. Crtalić uses his physical body as a material for art production and as a platform for transcendental experiences which he then employs to construct his own artistic language. In *Living Dead*, tallow from his head symbolises a matter, a product of his subconscious. His work is intensely and purposefully sexualised.

Crtalić also uses shamanic trance and similar states induced by drugs or magical herbs such as henbane. His experiments with henbane in 1999 ended up with him being hospitalised at the Vrapče psychiatric hospital in Zagreb. Reflecting upon his experiences of hallucinations and dreams, the artist explained that “some of the works simply could not have been created in any other way” (Crtalić in an interview with the author, 2012). During the interview, he frequently referred to states of shifting between states of consciousness. He explained that in his dreams, visions and hallucinations, he often identified himself with the creative substance symbolised by semen or imagined himself in the form of semen, trying to reconcile his erotic fantasies and the need for an investigative approach to life and art. He also uses his own semen in many works, for instance in the installation *Devil’s Seed* (2000). The work consists of a video and a sculpture made of preservatives containing his semen.

Crtalić’s work was influenced by Joseph Beuys. Crtalić recounts Beuys’ plane crash of the Second World War. As a Luftwaffe pilot, Beuys survived a plane crash in the Crimea and was, as he claimed, nursed back to health by Tatar shamans who wrapped his body in tallow and felt. Indeed, tallow and felt became key materials of his sculptures and installations. Crtalić makes numerous references to Beuys’ choice of tallow in his own artistic practice, in particular works such as *I like America and America likes me*, performed at René Block Gallery in New York in 1974. Felt is a material that absorbs fat; the same way sebaceous fluid is fat produced by the human body. Besides sebum, Crtalić also uses other materials in his work; his own hair, bark, blood, archaeological objects, his own semen in order to explore the limits of his own body while deconstructing a myth of the masculine.

## Fine Embroidery

*Fine Embroidery* (2011) is the title of a video documented performance by the Croatian artist Marko Marković in which the artist attempts to comment on the connection between the male body and folklore. The performance took place at the festival *My Land* in Štaglinec in Croatia. Marković used a needle and thread to perform traditional Slavonian embroidery on his own body (Figure 3.3).

Marković is known in the region for his politically subversive performances, often linking body art with self-wounding or cutting. He often includes the audience in his performative works, creating a kind of a physical theatre-based interactive installation. For instance, in his performance entitled *Needling*, staged at the Student Centre Gallery in



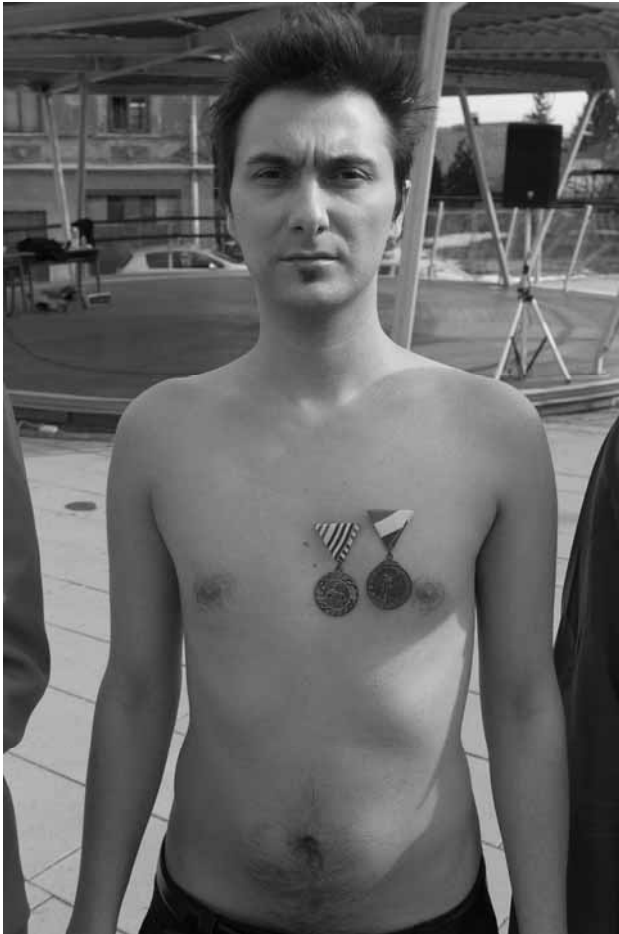


Figure 3.3 Marko Marković, *Model Suit*, 2011. Performance.  
Photograph: @Igor Juran.

Zagreb in 2008, the artist stood in front of the Croatian flag and invited the audience to throw needles at him.

In *Selfeater*, performed in 2009 at the DOPUST Festival in Split and Močvara Club in Zagreb, the artist consumed his own blood. In the first part of the performance, Marković gave the visitors soft red coloured cotton candy (colour which simulated blood). In the second part, a nurse

placed a tube in his vein. The artist then drank his blood, turning himself into a symbol of political, but also social vampirism.

In *Model Suit* (2011), performed at DOPUST Festival in Split, Marković read a manifesto on workers rights, and then invited female workers from the now closed down textile company *Uzor* to take his measurements and make him a suit. During the performance, the workers of another closed down factory *Dalmacijavino* performed a song *Kud plovi ovaj brod* (*Where does this ship sail to*). In his manifesto, the artist read that workers do not want to work for charity, but to earn their own money (see Centrefold). By introducing the workers from companies that closed down during the transition period into an artistic medium, Marković sent a message about how an artistic act can become political and social at the same time. Analysing his own relationship toward the physical pain that he experiences during his performances, Marković remarks:

“The suffering comes from things I have seen when I observed people. People suffer from many different things, so I decided to take the pain component, which I then shifted onto a physical part of myself. I tried to interpret it in a certain subliminal way, but now, I try to bring my own body to the limits of endurance.” (Marković cited in Golub, 2009)

In *Fine Embroidery* (2011), in his choice of lace for stitching Marković points to the traditional patriarchal cultures of Southern Slavs, in particular the cultures of Eastern Croatia and Northern Serbia. Traditionally, young women preparing for a wedding used to make embroidery, decorating pillows, sheets and blankets for their dowry. Young women used to keep decorated sheets and blankets in special chests or boxes that were brought to their new homes (Vitez, 2003). A woman would prepare embroidery for her union with the man, and for the coming offspring. This symbolism of marital bonding is even more pronounced among the Eastern Slavs who place embroidered scarves under the head of a new-born child. The same scarf, received at birth, is later displayed in their house, and after the owner passes away, it is placed under their head once more, to accompany them in the afterlife. In performing fine embroidery on his own skin, Marković also refers to a male initiation or a coming-of-age passage and references the Slavic myth associated with marital bonding.

During *Fine Embroidery*, Marković employed a traditional Croatian folk band to play the tamburica. This choice of musical accompaniment for the performance is part of the artist’s commentary on the Balkan male archetype; a man who can suffer and withstand the pain. Marković wounds himself by cutting himself to the rhythm performed by the traditional tamburica, an instrument mainly found in rural Slavonia, a region with a

specific rural culture that is connected to Pannonia and its history, as it once represented the border of the Turkish Empire and Habsburg Empire.

Slavonia is known for numerous festivals dedicated to the tamburica. 'Fine embroidery' is not just a reference to lace, but also to a certain style in which national instruments such as the tamburica or the accordion are commonly performed at weddings, political rallies as well as at cafes or nightclubs. The connoisseur of the fine embroidery of the accordion or tamburica represents the idealised male Balkan archetype. According to traditional Serbian culture, at a traditional wedding for example everything, including the glasses, plates and ashtrays must be broken for a good luck and the guests dance on the broken glass. Marković did not use broken glass in his performance, but a needle, to embroider a symbol of female fertility in the traditional patriarchal cultures of the region on his chest.

Describing one of the more provocative performances *Selfeater*, Marković made references to human sacrifice:

“Once upon a time, humans ate other humans, but today they eat themselves, thus, creating a material and spiritual legacy doomed to fail. Due to the circumstances they find themselves in, they could make drastic moves and are sometimes prepared, under the influence of society, politics, love, hate and even a status that is imposed on their freedom, to sacrifice even themselves.” (Marković in Tretinjak, 2009)

This statement delineates the artist's perspective on the impossibility of emancipation. The author refers to the impossibility of change within the contemporary consumerist society where the only option is to “eat oneself”. The position of a victim, the artist refers to, is of a key importance for understanding *Fine Embroidery*, as well as his whole body of work. Through different actions, Marko Marković uses his own body as a tool of protest, the only tool he can use to turn the public's attention to the other side.

## Commemorating war through national monuments

Sarajevo-born, New York-based artist Nebojša Šerić Šoba's created the sculpture *Monument to the International Community* (2007), a monument commemorating the war in the former Yugoslavia. The sculpture was installed as part of the action *De/construction of the Monument*, organised by the Sarajevo Centre for Contemporary Art (Figure 3.4). The project was initiated by art historian Dunja Blažević, with an aim to “redefine the notion and form of monuments (as we know them), their function, meaning and the messages they transmit” (Blažević, 2006).



Figure 3.4 Nebojša Šerić Šoba, *Monument to the International Community*, 2007. Sarajevo. Photograph: @Admir Mujkic

The project was based on an open competition to construct a new monument in a public space, and Šerić Šoba's piece won in the public vote. Inspired by a particular design of a tin container, emblematic of the food distributed to citizens of Sarajevo during the war, the artist placed an enlarged replica of the Icarus-marked canned beef on a marble pedestal.

The can was labelled with the European Union symbol and all the ingredients were listed. The monument of the Icarus canned beef is a memorial to food distributed in Sarajevo as humanitarian aid during the war. The Icarus can also features in the film *Circle of Memory* by Andrea Rossini (2007). The film deals with the problem of place and memory in the former Yugoslavia, hypothesizing that remembering the victims and the crime within that place creates a fertile ground for new wars and

victims. Šerić Šoba's monument has been described as the best monument dedicated to the war suffering of Sarajevo (Rossini, 2007).

In the project *De/construction of Monument*, Dunja Blažević focuses on the destiny of monuments dedicated to the former political system in the states, created after the breakup of Yugoslavia. The process of turning the class narrative into the national narrative resulted in the destruction of many historically significant monuments from the Socialist era. Simultaneously, several new monuments dedicated to national notables were erected, some of a very questionable quality. In the project's outline of *De/construction of the Monument*, Blažević writes:

“The ruling national elites produce appropriate forms of representation, corresponding with mythical images and symbols of a legendary and tragic national history. The implantation of a new cultural matrix is performed through the rewriting of history and erasure of memory.” (Blažević, 2006)

Blažević explained Šerić Šoba's motivation for distancing himself from the dominant political and ideological narratives of the Western Balkans, namely that the monument represents the negation of new national myths arising from the war tragedies. The monument dedicated to a beef can, a poor quality food in a cheap packaging, pushes this new mythology to the point of absurdity. Instead of erecting a monument dedicated to the suffering of one nation because of the terror of another, he created a monument dedicated to the suffering of all nations because of the terror of poor culinary taste. Nebojša Šerić Šoba's *Monument to the International Community* is continuously photographed covered in graffiti, and still on display in Sarajevo. This sculpture is one of Šerić Šoba's most successful pieces, highlighting the artist's ironic approach to representing personal traumatic experiences as well as the paradigm of war in the region. In referring to the events of the Bosnian war, and drawing on wartime experience he points out:

“Shooting and bombing make up the smallest part of the time spent in the war. Time is spent digging up the trenches, walking at the frontline and back, cleaning weapons and carrying all sorts of boxes and tools, or heavy train racks to support trenches on your shoulders, all of this at night, uphill, through mud and rain.” (Šerić Šoba, 2012)

In other words, the artist sees the war as an event based on the performance of meaningless daily rituals. In elaborating further, he recounts:

“I couldn’t be moved any more, I was freezing so much that I felt certain bliss, some sort of nonviolent end of everything that made up my useless existence. Occasionally, a colleague next to me would make a little fire out of bits and pieces of cigarette boxes, paper and plastic, which we then tried to hide with blankets.” (Šerić Šoba, 2012)

The artist admits that in his view the war in Bosnia, as any other war served to obliterate and annihilate human beings. Terror and fear resulted in people’s psychological withdrawal; people did not show their emotions or talk about their wounds.

The artist comments on common negative perceptions held with regard to the entire region and an overall critical stance most countries had towards the former Yugoslavia during the conflict and onwards. Such enduring negative perceptions perpetuate historical art narratives in which there is no room for ex-Yugoslavian artists who seemingly ‘do not exist’ in the West. Šerić Šoba is acutely aware of such perceptions.

Šerić Šoba’s photographic work entitled *Sarajevo-Monte Carlo* (1998) is based on the artist’s own memories of military service during the war in Bosnia. He alludes to the paradigm of two Balkan characters, a soldier and a criminal. The work, consisting of two black and white photographs, is a comment on the wars in the former Yugoslavia. One of the photographs depicts the artist in the context of the war, participating in the defence of Sarajevo. He poses as a soldier in a military uniform and holds a Kalashnikov, while standing in a muddy trench anticipating attack.

The second photograph was taken at the harbour in Monte Carlo. The artist is dressed as a Balkan criminal; he wears a leather vest, a large golden chain around his neck and a scarf around his head. The background in the war photograph is taken up by trenches towering into the grey sky, while the background of the Monte Carlo photograph includes yachts, hotels with the mountains in the distance. The protagonist in the photograph from Sarajevo appears unshaven, thin looking and battered, while in Monte Carlo’s image he appears clean-shaven, well-nourished and self-content. What remained of a soldier is an empty shell of a uniform where even blood looks unreal. The artist made a reference to the Benetton billboard by Oliver Toscani, depicting the bloody uniform of a killed soldier of The Croatian Defence Council in Mostar. Similarly, the Croatian artist Ivan Fiočić used pop culture references like Toscani’s billboard, and created the Bruce Lee monument, erected in the Spanish square, the frontline space during the war in Mostar (Figure 3.5). The monument was intended to help transcend people’s trauma projecting kung-fu symbolism of the pre-war generation.



Figure 3.5 Ivan Fiolić, *Bruce Lee*, Mostar. Photograph: @Kristina Lenard

### **Boobs Boulevard**

Arion Asllani is a Serbian artist of Albanian origin. In his art practice, Asllani collaborates with non-governmental organisations, cultural institutions and theatre groups. He creates performative pieces that employ humour to address both current national and global socio-political issues as well as to comment on the nature of art making. Most Albanian contemporary artists have chosen to work in the Republic of Kosovo or in Albania, especially after Kosovo's separation from Serbia. Asllani is part of a handful of ethnic Albanian artists, working in Serbia today. The Serbian government refuses to acknowledge the independence of Kosovo.

In 2008 in Belgrade, members of Serbian nationalist organisations employed threats and violence to shut down the opening and indeed to cancel the group show *Exception, The Contemporary Art Scene of Priština*, featuring work by young Kosovar artists, at Kontekst Gallery. This explains why Asllani's *Boobs Boulevard* was first shown in Kučevo, a town populated primarily by Vlachs, an ethnic minority in Eastern Serbia. *Boobs Boulevard* was first shown there in 2008, and then in Remont Gallery in Belgrade in 2009. For *Boobs Boulevard*, Asllani decided to 'pay tribute to female breasts' by proposing to name a street after them in which he installed casts of female breasts along the length of the street. The artist used the gallery space as a casting room, where gallery visitors could have casts of their breasts made (Figure 3.6). Asllani employed female assistants to help with the casting process. They used the plaster moulds to make silicone casts. All of the collected moulds were archived, and each sculpture was displayed within its own structure, symbolising as the artist argued, individuality of each woman. In his artist statement, Asllani writes:



Figure 3.6 Arion Asllani, *Boobs Boulevard*, 2008. Video Performance  
Photograph: Ivan Petrovic. Courtesy of the artist

“I have been obsessed with and fascinated by female breasts since my early childhood. The female is the focus, female identity, which implies a female fingerprint and female breasts as the immediately recognisable symbol of



motherhood, sexuality, fetishism, eroticism, humanity, gender, sex, lust, love, altruism, ethics and aesthetics.” (Asllani cited in Arte, 2009)

According to Asllani, a fingerprint must come from the male’s right hand in order to truly symbolise male identity, from the same hand that, in a political context, can be seen in a Roman or Nazi salute.

“The symbolic male fingerprint, taken from the male’s right hand, is replaced by the female torso. Fingers have evolved into breasts, and therein lays the fundamental difference in male and female identity.” (Asllani cited in Arte 2009)

The artist does not explain why the female fingerprint does or does not relate to female identity, but claims that the female fingerprint has become an ‘irrelevant category of identification’. Arion Asllani clearly references the work of Marina Abramović. In a 2005 interview with New York Magazine, Abramović stated:

“The woman with her breasts exposed is a kind of erotic that’s very vulgar, very predictable, and we are fed by these very standard images.” (Abramović in Rosenberger, 2005)

It remains unclear why the fingerprint is a symbol of male identity, but the artist seems to indirectly comment upon illiteracy rates in the countries of the former Yugoslavia. Population censuses from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and more recent ones show a high incidence of adult illiteracy, as well as the highest incidence of individuals with low education levels in Europe. Therefore, the male right hand also signifies an illiterate hand.

Asllani alludes to the construction and perpetuation of gender-based stereotypes in local folklore. Traditional songs and local customs allude to key female archetypes; a virgin, a mother and a whore. Symbols of fertility are intertwined with symbols of desire and vice-versa. For example, in Dalmatia, the Dalmatian Zagora songs celebrating fertility and desire continue to be performed in front of churches after Sunday Mass. In such traditional communities, even today any female that does not conform to these archetypes would be proclaimed a witch. Any kind of pronounced sexual behaviour instigated by a woman, without serving the purpose of satisfying male’s desire, would be seen as witch’s business.



Figure 3.7 *Spring Bonfire* by Perunova Svetinja.  
 Courtesy of Deniver Vukelic, Perunova Svetinja

According to Deniver Vukelić (2009), witch-related prosecutions in Croatia and the region instigated by the synod resulted in tortures and civil trials in the manner of an Inquisition. The majority of the alleged female bewitchments or spells in the Western Balkans were based on the power of the vagina or other fertility symbols, such as breasts.

### **Balkan Erotic Epic**

In several of her works, Marina Abramović engages with fertility symbols, mythological characters and tradition. Her artistic practice is not only associated with the legends and traditions of Serbia but encompasses wider Balkan and Slavic mythological surroundings. Abramović was born in 1946 in Belgrade and grew up in a ‘red bourgeoisie’ family. One of her most iconic early pieces, *Rhythm 2* (Figure 3.8) was first performed in Zagreb in 1974 at the Gallery of Contemporary Art. In the accompanying catalogue, which includes documentation of the other performances from the *Rhythm* series, art historian Davor Matičević, one of the most active promoters of new art practices in then Socialist Yugoslavia, wrote:

“Marina Abramović seeks out behaviour determined by forces outside of her own control; she explores magical symbols and invisible pressures of destruction within and outside of the body and character.” (Matičević, 1974)

Abramović's exploration of traditional Slavic culture and history examines the relationship between written and oral cultures. The basic colonial premise differentiates between cultures that have a written language and those cultures that only have an oral tradition and are considered 'inferior'. The Slavs were given a written language by the Byzantine monks Cyril and Methodius, after converting to Christianity.



Figure 3.8 Marina Abramović, *Rhythm 2*, 1974. Performance. Courtesy of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Documentation and Information Department, Zagreb. Photograph: Marijan Susovski.

Indeed, it was Christianity that acted as a force behind the formation of ethnic Slavic communities, which ultimately became different nations. It could be argued that the attitude Slavs have towards their own mythology

is framed by a colonial discourse. The mythological worldview is perpetuated today in the hidden forms through folk tradition and culture, in texts of folk poetry, local rituals and customs (Belaj, 2007). Abramović in her video work *Balkan Erotic Epic* (2005) explores this traditional and magical heritage of Balkans, which, as she argues, is deeply suppressed and resides in the collective unconscious. In one of her interviews, Abramović contextualises the piece for an international audience as follows:

“In Balkan culture, the sexual organs, male and female, were used as tools for taking evil away, connecting with the forces of nature. I found all these different rituals, going back to the 16th century, and staged them in a film.” (Abramović cited in Rosenberger, 2005)

The video commences with a similar narration. Personifying the character of a traditional storyteller, Abramović narrates: “In the ancient times the people of the Balkans used phallus and vagina as a tool for fighting against disease and evil forces” (*Balkan Erotic Epic* 2005). The artist oscillates in the spaces of duality between the magical and the artistic, as well as the holy and the profane. Work by the anthropologist Suzana Marjanić from the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research, contextualises the understanding of the female archetypal character; witch, nightmare or fairy. Suzana Marjanić writes:

“Perhaps the concept of a Southern Slavic goddess can be located in the duality of fairy-baba [hag], the figure of the young and of course beautiful goddess (given the prevailing idiom - beautiful as a fairy) and her femininity (the fairy) dedicated to healing white magic and the figure of the aged goddess (baba/old lady, hag), to whom traditional belief systems attribute negative value judgements of femininity and the practice of black magic (the baba witch, the fortune-teller-hag, the Russian Baba Yaga, Baba Ruga, babaroga, the babica/midwife as birthing demon).” (2005, 121)

Marina Abramović draws on a notion of the Southern Slavic goddess and points out the role of sexual organs in old local customs associated with harvest and fertility:

“In the villages there would be lots of rain, which would damage the growing corn - so all the women of the village, from the very young to the very old, would run into the fields and lift their skirts to scare the gods and make the rain stop.” (Rosenberger, 2005)

The artist's relationship towards her own body has defined her entire artistic career, starting from the most famous *Rhythm* series. In *Rhythm 2* (1974), the artist sitting on a table started to take various medication pills (Figure 3.9), first a pill normally prescribed to treat catatonia, second a pill for the treatment of aggression and depression. In *Rhythm 4* (1974), the artist appeared in an empty and bright-lit space and inhaled air from the operating air blower until she lost her consciousness.



Figure 3.9 Marina Abramović, *Rhythm 2*, 1974. Performance. Courtesy of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Documentation and Information Department, Zagreb. Photograph: Marijan Susovski.

In these works, the artist used her own body as a tool for experimentation. In some cases, she experiments with her will beyond the limits of consciousness (*Rhythm 4*), and she pushes her body beyond control (Figure 3.10). She wounds herself with knives or moulds her looks

by cutting her hair. In these early works, Abramović also makes references to various symbols such as the five-pointed star, and returns to these throughout her career, using it in different contexts. An example of her later use of the star symbol is the multi-channel video installation *Count on Us*, displayed at the 2004 Whitney Biennial. It is a recording of the artist dressed in a skeleton costume, like those worn in Mexico on the Day of the Dead, while lying inside a five-pointed star.



Figure 3.10 Marina Abramović, *Rhythm 2*, 1974. Performance. Courtesy of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Documentation and Information Department, Zagreb. Photograph: Marijan Susovski.

From the beginning of her career, Abramović used video technology to document performances. In her later career, aestheticization replaced the documentary character of the work, and certain later video pieces also contained classic film narratives. Marina Abramović is an artist who, from the beginning, used her own body as the only tool. Hence, in order to

understand the artist's energy, gesture and an almost shamanic ritual, it was necessary to document her performances in a video. Only audio and video recordings can show the complexity of the work. Be it the sound of a knife or the murmur of the audience watching the artist taking the pills. Precisely in the work *Rome 4* (1974), she used video not only as a mere document, but also as an aid to the spectacle. Visitors could not enter the room where she performed, but they could watch the performance as voyeurs through the video. In that way, the audience became a part of the work, and the audience's presence is the documentation of the act itself.

In later works, such as *Count on Us* (Whitney Biennale, 2004) the artist appears as the actor, narrator and performer. Video was aestheticized and it became a part of a narrative whole. The artist's body was no longer the only tool of performance; her collaborators who appeared in the video works also played a role. These can be children dressed in pioneer uniforms from the time of the artist's Socialist youth (*Count on Us Boy, Girl*), or women exposing their genitals to the rain (*Balkan Erotic Epic*).

*Balkan Erotic Epic* departs from Abramović's earlier work in yet another way and employs actors to perform the traditional rituals. The artist embodies herself through other bodies, which is precisely the message conveyed in her more recent performance entitled *The Artist is Present* presented at MOMA in New York in 2010. For 736 hours and 30 minutes, Abramović embodied herself to the gallery visitors by sitting in one of the gallery's rooms. In this performance, Abramović draws on Joseph Beuys' notion of social sculpture. Like Beuys, Abramović constructed a sculpture that comes to life in the social interaction between the artist and the audience. The artwork therefore moves to the ephemeral space. The author of the text that accompanied the first public performance of the anthological work *Rhythm 2* in the Gallery of Contemporary Art in Zagreb is art historian Davor Matičević. Up until his premature death, in 1994, Matičević was one of the most important theoreticians of new art practices that emerged in Yugoslavia in the 1970s and the 1980s.

In 1974, writing about Abramović's early work, Matičević notes that:

"The strong effects of the tools, meanings and the suggestive behaviour of the artist/interpreter create an intense experience for the audience, erasing the border between performer and audience, allowing the audience to become involved." (Matičević, 1974)

Matičević's observations of applied artistic technique hold true throughout Abramović's career. Matičević concludes: "She uses contemporary artistic language to warn, by transcending reality and entering a new, constructed, artistic reality" (1974).

In *Balkan Erotic Epic*, Abramović attempts to eradicate the border between reality and art. The video consists of several stories told in a classic narrative form, accompanied by a commentary by the artist. Some of the narratives are presented in a traditional animation form, which on the one hand supports the documentary nature of the work and on the other, gives an impression of a fairy-tale-like dimension, alluding to local legends and myths.

References are being made to various traditional rituals and customs that used to be sexually-infused. For instance, she cites a custom performed during a complicated birth; the husband of the woman in labour used to place his phallus on the woman's breasts so they together form a cross shape. In another sequence, Abramović refers to the ritual aimed to enhance crop fertility where Balkan men used to masturbate into holes dug in the ground, fertilising the earth. It could be argued that some of the local rituals and folk customs introduced by Abramović in *Balkan Erotic Epic* are related to the work of Arion Asllani. For instance, Abramović refers to another fertility custom whereby women used to sing as they gazed up at the sky and squeezed their breasts to stimulate milk production. Or, in another fertility-based custom, women used to run across a field in the rain, lifting their skirts and exposing their genitals to the earth.

In *Balkan Erotic Epic* Abramović narrates local customs in a scientific manner, as if she were an anthropologist, combining research on tradition with invented rituals, weaving together fact and fiction. Both, female and male nude bodies cease to be sexual and become creatures endowed with natural powers. The vagina becomes a fertility symbol, a symbol that marks the passage from one world into another and the embodiment of the baby, a new life. In rural cultures, an infertile woman is still compared to a barren land, or a dry and rootless tree. The Balkan woman in Marina Abramović's video unites both celebrated and condemned figures in local communities; a virgin, an alchemist, a mother, a whore, a witch.

Marina Abramović ironically projects to a Western audience, the representation of Balkan cultures based on stereotypes and common sense assumptions. Such an approach corresponds well with Nebojša Šerić Šoba's work from the 1990s and the war period in particular. Šoba's characters of a warrior-criminal or a provincial football player, as well as Abramović's characters of a husband of a pregnant woman or village witches, are precisely the kind of archetypal images of the Balkans in popular imagery. Such images have been constructed through generations, featuring in the novel *The Bridge on the Drina* by Nobel Prize winner Ivo Andrić or Emir Kusturica's films. Political events in the 1990s and bloody images projected by the Western media only reinforced these stereotypes.



In the work of Marina Abramović, we cannot separate the artist's persona from the work she creates and the characters that she embodies. In *Balkan Erotic Epic* the artist becomes a ritual performer, using her body as the work. Participants in Asllani's *Boobs Boulevard* expose their breasts to plaster and water, and in Abramović's *Balkan Erotic Epic* female genitals are exposed in the natural environment and men enhance fertility, engaging in sexual acts with the earth itself.

Abramović conveys these ideas through the medium of video, creating a somewhat subversive message within a medium that suggests virtual reality. If we analyse the editing of *Balkan Erotic Epic*, we may notice that it is subject to an almost conservative narration. Such is Marina Abramović's relation to the video medium as well. Technology and technical enhancements are not there for their own sake; they are focused on one person only, the artist. Her image is also mediated through a ritual experienced by the gallery's visitors, as well as by the viewers absorbed in the video. The technology serves the transformation of the shaman's energy (Marina Abramović) to reach those the work is addressed to.

## Conclusions

Culture can be envisaged as a large faded palimpsest with numerous layers. The former Yugoslav countries have to be observed in their complexity; cultural heritage has been written out in layers, on several times reused parchment.

In Marina Abramović's invented rituals we find references to the ancient myth of Jarilo and Morana. The myth refers to the fertilization of the soil. After a sexual intercourse under the Sacred Tree, Morana and Jarilo found out they were brother and sister. Subsequently, Morana with her brothers killed Jarilo, cut him into pieces and scattered the parts around the field to yield better crop. Jarilo is believed to have brought fertility to the land, cattle and people (Katičić, 2010). Body parts merging with the land and fertilizing the land, are an equivalent to body rituals in Abramović's work. Men copulating with the land, women touching their breasts and exposing their vaginas, invoke not only the sacred coitus between Jarilo and Morana, but also his cut off phallus that fertilizes the land each spring (Katičić, 2010).

In the work of Nebojša Šerić Šoba, we encounter references to Socialist realist art and Balkan art seen through a Capitalist lens. The systemic structure of neoliberalism, regardless of postmodern deconstruction, enters a phase of its own auto-cannibalism and becomes, in the words of Marko Marković, a 'self-eater'. The former Yugoslav region is still in the

process of the socio-economic, political and cultural transition; this process is marked by both the folklore-based cultural matrix and by a resistance to the ‘McGuggenheim’ effect. That was the term the American art historian Robert Storr used to describe the new museum of contemporary art in his lecture, held at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Zagreb in 2011. The process of turning art into a commodity was already described by Guy Debord in his manifesto on *the Society of the Spectacle* first published in France in 1967. Pierre Guilet de Monthoux (2004) describes the moment where art merges with the structures of neoliberal empire:

“Since U.S. president Ronald Reagan and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, assisted by business-art clubs such as the BCA and ABSA, reoriented art funding toward the corporate world, Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons have replaced Coca Cola and McDonald’s as the brands for this new audience of privatised U.S. and British culture. After inspecting objects in the galleries, they shop for aesthetic philosophy on sale in museum shops.” (2004, 341)

Folk matrix survived in the former Yugoslavia for only one reason. That is because, in the region, there are still no big private galleries. However, all the artists from the region who are more actively visible in the West became part of the almighty market.

As seen through the examples of the work of contemporary artists discussed in this chapter, originating from a traditional cultural matrix, the issue of gender dualism continues as an indestructible ideological construct in the Balkans. A man is a man, and a woman is a mother, and their roles have been determined by the earth, as Marina Abramović depicts and narrates. The mythology of the former Yugoslav region has been equated to political ideology. The fact is that the majority of nationalist leaders from the 1990s publicly acted as the incarnations of legendary historical figures. Thus, Franjo Tuđman invoked the spirit of the defeat of Nikola Šubić Zrinski at Siget, believing that he was defending European civilization from the Islamic fanaticism (Huntington, 1996), and Slobodan Milošević kept coming back to the myth of Kosovo Field as the honourable Serbian defeat that enabled the national redemption.

What followed after the 1990s was the revitalisation of political mythology through the associations of war veterans, religious lay organizations, annual celebrations and commemorations of the legacy of war. By referring to these myths and others, the national leaders seem to be leaning on the dominant masculine constructs.

A patriarchal dogma is perpetuated through history despite continuous shifts in political narratives and changes in attitudes towards religion and value systems more generally. The Croatian politician Ante Starčević, was referred to as the Father of the Fatherland. Politicians who came to power in the early 1990s in the former Yugoslav republics were, on their pre-election posters, mainly represented in the company of children. It was them who introduced the custom of becoming godfathers to families with more children. A family that procreates and grows, with a patriarchal warrior at the head, becomes a pillar of the society.

Nationalist and patriarchal constructions are examined in the video art created in the Western Balkans, with the medium of video having a different use from that in the West. In Balkans, the generated image represents a mere document of an event, harsh truth, or alludes to an obvious lie. Representation of ideologies, religious beliefs and cultural conflicts gives the video-generated image weight. In the West, the video-generated image is a reflection of continuous celluloid entertainment. The video image, thus, goes beyond the limits of technology and becomes a mechanical tool, just like a hoe or plough. The thing that transforms it is the knowledge of 'artist-shamans' such as Marina Abramović or Marijan Crtalić.

If we can grasp some of these paradoxes, then we will be able to understand the myth of Balkan masculinity in contemporary art production in the former Yugoslav region on multiple levels, including the political, social and cultural.

## Bibliography

- Abramović, Marina. *Count On Us*. Video. 2004.  
 —. *Balkan Erotic Epic* Video. 2005.  
 Asslani, Arion. 'Boobs Boulevard'. 2009 Accessed November 20, 2012.  
[http://www.arte.rs/sr/aktuelno/arion\\_asllani\\_boobs\\_boulevard-5240](http://www.arte.rs/sr/aktuelno/arion_asllani_boobs_boulevard-5240)  
 Belaj, Vitimir. *Hod kroz godinu* [Walking through the Year] Zagreb: Golden Marketing. 2007.  
 Bey, Hakim. *Privremene autonomne zone* [Temporary Autonomous Zone]. Translated by Larisa Petrić. Naklada Jesenski i Turk, Zagreb. 2003.  
 Blažević, Dunja. 'O novom spomeniku' [On the New Monument]. 2006. Accessed November 20, 2012.  
[http://www.scca.ba/deconstruction/about\\_new\\_monument.php?lang=bh](http://www.scca.ba/deconstruction/about_new_monument.php?lang=bh)  
 Coulibeuf, Pierre. *The Star*. Video. 1999.

- Denegri, Ješa. *Dossier Beuys*, translated by Biljana Romić Zagreb: DAF. 2003.
- Debord, Guy. *Society of the Spectacle*, Black & Red, 1967/1984.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. London: Pluto Press. 1968/2008.
- Guilet de Monthoux, Pierre. *The Art Firm* Stanford: Stanford University Press. 2004.
- Golub, Marko, 'Marko Marković - o pijenju vlastite krvi i zarađivanju na samome sebi' [Marko Marković - On drinking one's own blood and self-profit], 2009. Accessed November 17, 2012.  
[http://www.dnevnikulturni.info/vijesti/likovnost/2417/marko\\_markovic](http://www.dnevnikulturni.info/vijesti/likovnost/2417/marko_markovic)
- Hardt, Michael and Antonio Negri *Empire*, Harvard University Press, 2000
- Huntington, Samuel P. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Simon & Schuster, 1996.
- Labrović, Siniša. 'Postgraduate Education' 2009. Accessed November 18, 2012. <http://www.labrovic.com/projects/postgraduate-education>
- Katičić, Radoslav. *Zeleni lug* [The Green Grove]. Zagreb: Ibis grafika. 2010.
- Latour, Bruno. *We Were Never Modern* Harvard University Press. 1993.
- Levi-Strauss, Claude. *The Savage Mind*, University of Chicago Press. 1962/1968.
- Mance, Ivana. 'Spektakli transgresija' [Spectacles of Transgression] 2008. Accessed November 16, 2012.  
<http://www.galerija-striegl.hr/07-crtalic.html>
- Marjanić, Suzana. 'Vještice psihonavigacije i astralna metla u svjetovima hrvatskih predaja kao (mogući) aspekti šamanske tehnike ekstaze (i transa)' [Witch psychonavigations and the astral broom in the world of Croatian legends as (possible) aspects of shamanic ecstasy (and trance)] *Stud Ethnol Croat*, 111/17:111-169. 2005.
- Matičević, Davor. *Katalog izložbe Marine Abramović* [Marina Abramović, exhibition catalogue]. Zagreb: GSU. 1974.
- Ostojić, Sunčica. 'Living Dead (Globalization of the Subconscious), Work in Progress', 2009. Accessed November 15, 2012.  
<http://www.kontejner.org/living-dead-globalization-of-the-subconscious---english>
- Pavlović. Živojin. 'Kada budem mrtav i beo' [*When I Am Dead and Gone*] 1966.
- Plutarchus. *O Izidi i Ozirisu* [On Isis and Osaris]. Translated by Ljiljana Živković. Zagreb: Integra. 1993.
- Rosenberger, Karen. 'Provocateur: Marina Abramovic', New York Magazine, December 4. 2005.

- Rosini, Andrea. 'Il cerchio del ricordo' *Observatorio sui Balcani*. 2007.
- Šerić, Nebojša 'Peksinluk', 2012. <http://www.shobaart.com/san-zimskog-ljeta/peksinluk/>
- Šerić, Nebojša. 'U rovu na brdu Žuč', [In a trench on Žuč hill] 2012. <http://www.radiosarajevo.ba/novost/76197/nebojsa-seric-soba-u-roavuna-brdu-zuc>
- Tretinjak, Igor. 'Marko Marković u performansu jede samoga sebe', [Marko Marković eats himself in a performance] 2009. <http://www.tportal.hr/kultura/kulturmix/35388/Marko-Markovic-u-performansu-jede-samoga-sebe.html#.UJAmTVIC3IA>
- Vitez, Zorica. *Hrvatski svadbeni običaji* [Croatian Marriage Customs]. Zagreb: Golden marketing. 2003.
- Vukelić, Deniver. 'Utjecaj Katoličke crkve na svjetovne progone vještica u Zagrebu u ranom novom vijeku' [The influence of the Catholic Church on secular witch hunts in Zagreb in the early new ages] *RADOVI Zavod za hrvatsku povijest*, 41: 201- 208. 2009.
- Zabel, Igor. 'Tragedy 1999', 2000+ *Arteast Collection: The Art of Eastern Europa*. A selection of works for the International and National Collections of Moderna galerija Ljubljana. Zdenka Badovinac, Peter Weibel (Eds.), Exhibition catalogue, Wien, Bozen: Folio 2001.
- Župan, Ivica. *Pragmatičari, dogmati, sanjari* [Pragmatists, Dogmatists, Dreamers] Samobor: Meridijani. 2007.



**PART II:**

**SEXING THE BORDER:  
ARTISTIC PRACTICE**





## CHAPTER FOUR

# PERFORMANCE DOCUMENTATION, GENDER AND MYTH IN THE AGE OF MOBILE INTERNET

BORYANA ROSSA

### **Introduction**

Performance art documentation and its significance for the evaluation of artistic work have been widely discussed, not only among performance art historians but also among artists. Debates have included issues of copyright and sales, questions concerning how artworks or artists are represented in art history and how art mythologies are created. At the same time, rapid developments in video, digital imaging and distribution technologies have impacted the formal and communicative qualities of documentation. With the aid of technologies, visibility was given to topics that otherwise have been silenced or put at the margins of the art system. The power of representation, traditionally concentrated in the hands of art critics, collectors, curators and historians, and their monopoly over stories and mythologies about artists' works, became a more accessible territory to artists, and even to the audience, similar to the phenomenon of how blogging culture changed contemporary journalism and writing more generally.

This chapter will examine the specificities of performance art documentation in the era of the mobile Internet. I will reflect on two major questions. First, in what way does technology empower the audience as an art mythology producer? Second, does technology help to undo the patriarchal hierarchies established between the so called an active artist and the passive audience? These major questions will be addressed through a review of Central and Eastern European performance art, and in particular, drawing on the examples from Russia and Bulgaria. I will also draw on my own practice as a performance artist, born in Bulgaria, but also living and working between Bulgaria and the USA for the last nine years. By focusing on representation of gender in performance art, and

discussing how documenting technology affects this representation, the aim of this chapter is to contribute to the context in which these hierarchies of artists and audience are perceived.

I will argue that the opportunity afforded by the digital age for recording and distributing the so called personal memories has turned the public into a collective subject, acting as a mythology producer rather than as a reader. Over the last ten years, digital photography, video, blogs and social networks have facilitated access for an audience to what has been so far edited for the public eye by the powerful agents in the art world, including curators, historians, and sometimes the artists themselves. This liberalization of technology led to the 'queering' of the relationship between the artist and the audience. At the same time, art institutions started to generate mythologies that suited them, through the use of the same, yet more democratic means of media and information technologies. These complex, intertwined processes have also had an impact on the formal quality of documentation and the constructed myths about document authenticity.

I am not going to discuss the differences of the use of technologies in Central and Eastern Europe by comparing them to the rest of the world, but instead, will concentrate on the appearance of a new social layer, an international one, created by social networks, both virtual and real. This layer actually generated a new geography of its own that is virtual in nature. Some scholars define this layer as a new class, privileged not so much by material possessions, but by connectedness and access to technology. This new privilege helps exchange of intellectual capital and generates new identity, which is more global in nature or at least international rather than local (Ong, 2006; Gapova, 2006). For instance, immigrants and frequent travellers use social networks and communication technologies to re-establish their own connections with their country of origin. At the same time, they are mixing a national identity with a new one, generated in new places and contexts, therefore constructing a hybrid. In this exchange, mobile Internet and smart phones are constantly used for live international update on local events. This also applies to performance art events that are recorded and spread across borders. This has never been possible before the popularisation of mobile communication technologies. Therefore, in recent years we have seen an increasing shift of performance art documentation from printed matter to YouTube videos and Tweets. As a consequence, a performance art event rarely happens without representation in the virtual world. In fact, if video documentation becomes 'viral' on the Internet this is now considered by many as a success. A viral image, video or text is a cultural artefact that is spread virally over the Internet. For

instance, the performance *Butter Dance* by Indonesian artist Melati Suryodarmo received over a billion views on YouTube, since it was posted online by Lilith Performance Studio in Malmö, Sweden where it was performed in 2010. The original performance had been dated as 2000 and was documented in the same year, but it really became popular when the video documentation was published online and it appealed to an international online audience, and consequently, became viral.

## The myth

The myth created about a performance art event is in fact a historical speech that cannot represent the nature of the actual performance, and neither can it stand for the on-site experience of the viewer, individual or collective. The notion of myth is borrowed from Roland Barthes (1972):

“Ancient or not, mythology can only have a historical foundation, for myth is a type of speech chosen by history: it cannot possibly evolve from the ‘nature’ of things. Speech of this kind is a message.” (Barthes, 1972, 110)

The myth generated from a performance art piece is linked with a message created through the complicated relationship between the performer’s intention, the experience of the viewers on site, the message they communicated after the performance and finally, by the multiple interpretations of this message in the public sphere. The speech chosen by history in performance documentation is both verbal and pictorial. So far, printed history produced predominantly by established art institutions has been empowered to affect the verbal history, only because in most cases it was the only existing record, based on a document of the actual event. These days performance documentation appears increasingly in a variety of hybrid mediums (films, blog posts, articles, and so on) and incorporates text and image. The use of the latter is essential for spinning out the myth, both about the artist and the artwork.

The participation of spectators in the production of art mythology has not been extensively studied so far. By enabling the creation of artefacts of personal memory, users are encouraged to see themselves as active mythology producers rather than passive mythology readers. This is true not only for observing and picturing random events but for organised live art events as well. Although documentation in exhibition spaces is usually not permitted, visitors habitually take photos with their telephones or other gadgets and post them to their web blogs, thus becoming documentary makers, mythologists and producers. Individuals share their personal

memories and experiences and distribute them over the Internet; a situation fundamentally different from the era before digital technologies, when documentation was left to professional photographers.

This new situation has induced what I shall call a 'queer' mode of thinking, where the notion of queer is defined as a subversion of binaries or alternation of power relations between the master narrative of the artist and the established representational art-machine, and the marginal narrative of the viewer. This process ran parallel to the third wave of feminism, when there was a break with the heterosexual binary. I do not claim that these processes in gender re-definition and technology are directly co-implicated in performance art documentation. This is only true for pieces that are consciously mastered by a queer-informed methodology. However, parallel reviewing of performances that address gender and technology, as well as target the dismantling of social hierarchies, reveals an epoch in which the questioning of authoritative binary oppositions, including gender oppositions, has escalated.

We can trace the dismantling of hierarchies in gender and art, through the deconstruction of mythology production. Besides the deconstruction of myths, we can also observe the construction of new ones for the purpose of dismantling hierarchies. As Barthes (1972) argues:

“...the best weapon against a myth is perhaps to mythify it in its turn, and to produce an artificial myth: and this reconstructed myth will in fact be a mythology. Since a myth robs language of something, why not rob a myth?” (Barthes, 1972, 135)

In some cases, artists aim to keep the critical distance from the myth they have constructed, to perpetuate the queering of power hierarchies between mythology producers and mythology readers. In one of my performances entitled *Blood Revenge 2* (2007), and described in detail later, I attempted to consciously involve the audience in the process of creating a myth with the use of photography, whilst critically analysing the methods of its creation.

Some artists also queer the borders of geo-political contexts, because they live in more than one country, thus seem to be dismantling myths and hierarchies across borders. There are other artists that after deconstructing the myth production, appropriate its methods to later reconstruct, perhaps unintentionally, the power relations that they have been initially fighting against (as in the case of the actions of Russian art collectives Voina and Pussy Riot). Interestingly enough, these are practices that do not recognise or even thoroughly ignore the gender dimension of political power, and in my view seem somewhat incapable of gender analysis of their own

activity (Plungian, 2011; Akulova, 2012).

It is appropriate to use Donna Haraway's (1991) definition of the cyborg to describe the agency of artists, who aim to dismantle binaries and deconstruct dominant myths with the help of technology:

“Cyborg gender is a local possibility taking a global vengeance. Race, gender, and capital require a cyborg theory of wholes and parts. There is no drive in cyborgs to produce total theory, but there is an intimate experience of boundaries, their construction and deconstruction. There is a myth system waiting to become a political language to ground one way of looking at science and technology and challenging the informatics of domination, in order to act potently.” (Haraway, 1991, 181)

Haraway (1991) proclaimed that the participation of technology in our life is so substantial that we are all already cyborgs. However, the properties of the cyborg as an embodiment of queer critique, is not what each of us acquires by default, just by using technology. The intimate experience and transgression of boundaries, the political language of the new myth system is discussed in this chapter in relation to performance art documentation.

In the examples discussed in the following section, I will analyse performance documentation practice that reflects the dialectics of media development and the politics of its use, consciously choosing a transgression of power restrictions. In the cases reviewed, the artists seem to instrumentalise what I call a cyborgian methodology for the promotion of a more diverse, inclusive and ok world.

## **Documentation and myth production as an art piece**

Referring to Walter Benjamin, Boris Groys (2004) argues that nowadays we do not just reproduce and consume copies of originals but that we are also capable of creating originals out of copies:

“Benjamin's new interpretation of the distinction between original and copy thus opens up the possibility not only of making a copy out of an original but also of making an original out of a copy. Indeed when the distinction between original and copy is merely a topological, contextual one, then it not only becomes possible to remove an original from its site and de-territorialize it, but also to re-territorialize the copy.” (Groys, 2004, 174)

Groys (2004) re-evaluates and raises performance art documentation to the status of an original art piece and the artificial to the state of the living:

“In the case of art documentation as an art form, as we have said, it is not “the making of...” any finished work that is documented. Rather, documentation becomes the sole result of art, which is understood as a form of life, duration, a production of history.” (p. 168)

As revealed by Groys (2004), the role of media not merely as an objective, mechanical reproducer but as the creator of a particular history is not always and necessarily recognised by artists and critics, who still associate technological media with accuracy, veracity and objectivity. This privileged interpretation of media generates a mythological field, a connection between the performance as a historical fact and its record.

In most of the cases, this ‘mythologisation’ has supported the status-quo, namely the Universalist phallogocentric ideology of male dominated art world hierarchies. However there are also artists, including performance artists, whose work has been challenging these hierarchies, exactly through the means of documentation.

The Russian artist Elena Kovylyna commented on documentation as a means for mythology construction in her performance entitled *Fresco as Documentation* (2004). For this piece she documented one of her previous performances entitled *Madonna with Jewels* (2003), about making a mural. In this performance made in Berlin, she attaches pearl pins on her naked chest, penetrating her skin with their needles. Her mural was an idealized, a stylized image, a sacred object around which she created a site of worship. By creating this mural the artist commented on how and why people and actions are remembered. Memories appear to be attached to things that are surrounded by a cult, they express a philosophy necessary for specific powerful agents, and have the capability of creating and sustaining the material object of worship (the fresco of Kovylyna with jewels).

Many of Kovylyna’s performances reveal how power is constructed. For the purposes of this text, I would like to review her performance entitled *Moral Inspection* (2004) in which the artist challenges and politicizes the private by making the private public with the help of new technologies, simultaneously addressing social and ethical issues of production.

For this performance, Kovylyna became a street prostitute in Salzburg, Austria for a night. She went to the hotel room with her clients, took their money in advance, and subsequently, told them that she was an artist and was not going to sleep with them (Figure 4.1). She also told them that if they wanted to get their money back, they had to come to the gallery and get it back publicly. One of the clients did show up. For this action, the use of small size digital recording equipment was used to help to prove the

action actually took place. We could argue that such an artistic method of documenting also diminishes possibility of speculation, like almost everything that happens in private.



Figure 4.1 Elena Kovylyna, *Moral Inspection*, 2004. Video still.  
Courtesy of the artist

It is important to mention that Kovylyna realises all her performances publicly. *Moral Inspection* was an exception, for logistic and conceptual reasons it was produced through an 'invisible' process. The possible speculations regarding the real happenings of the event became actually part of the work. We could argue that in general people have a tendency to hide many things, for instance, domestic violence that happens in private, which gives space for justification to the violators, mythologization of this sphere of life and stigmatization of one of the parties i.e. the prostitute. In this case, the artist engaged her clients in an activity that revealed a simple fact that the prostitutes involved in the so called immoral act are not the only ones to blame. The artist revealed a negotiation between the two parties i.e. the prostitute and her clients. In fact, the predominately male clients most of the time were hidden and anonymous and therefore appeared as non-existing. Kovylyna commented upon the existence of this agency, while by showing up in the gallery the client did not compromise

himself, but rather took a social responsibility for his actions. His action confirmed that sex negotiation is an act, in which the prostitute is not the only participant.

The *Moral Inspection* performance was made possible by the use of video recording and was also a comment on the documenting process as evidence and as an artefact. In my performance *Blood Revenge 2* (2007), performed at Exit Art, New York and Sofia in 2008, I set out to explore the power of the photographic record for the creation of myth perpetuating the phallogocentric culture (Figure 4.2). The piece was inspired by an example of performance art mythology created through documentation from the 1960s of the Viennese Actionist group. Rudolf Schwarzkogler performed a self-castration, as manifested in his photographic series entitled *2 Aktion* and *3 Aktion* from 1965. For about four decades, the myth that Schwarzkogler died after cutting his penis off has been perpetuated. *TIME* magazine critic Robert Hughes wrote in 1972:

“[Schwarzkogler is] the Vincent van Gogh of body art [who]....proceeded, inch by inch, to amputate his own penis, while a photographer recorded the act as an art event.” (Hughes, 1972)

This myth was also reproduced in performance art studies like Henry Sayre’s *The Object of Performance* (Sayre, 1989), a postmodern review of American avant-garde dance, performance art and photography from the 1950s until the 1970s. At the beginning of his book, Sayre argued for the reliability of photographic documentation:

“...the photographic record asserted itself most horribly in the documentation, exhibited in Kassel in 1972, of Rudolf Schwarzkogler’s 1969, piece by piece amputation of his own penis.” (Sayre, 1989, 2)

The photographs *2 Aktion* and *3 Aktion* are not part of a documentation of an actual performance, but instead, these are pre-arranged, staged scenes (Schwarz 1988, 338-340; Stiles 1990, 11-26). The model in the photograph was not Schwarzkogler himself but his friend Heiz Cibulka. Schwarzkogler set up and photographed the scene. Arguably, Sayre’s belief in the photographic record, which paradoxically appeared to be the theoretical foundation of his book, compromises his study of performance, as argued by Kristin Stiles (1990, 35-47). Some scholars, such as Philip Ursprung (2005, 129-143), pointed out a difference between English and German discourses about Viennese actionism, which might also shed the light on the politics of essentialization and perpetuation of myth based on cultural difference. Nevertheless, Sayre and Hughes have highlighted the



importance of documentation for artistic performance. They both pointed out that the production of mythology is indeed a tool that supports the phallogocentric dominance.

I first came to Schwarzkogler's story as a feminist artist. I have heard numerous critics and artists arguing that Schwarzkogler's performance was an unachievable deed of heroism. Therefore, I decided to perform a radical intervention on my own body as a performance piece, by looking at the photographic record of Schwarzkogler's so called performance that led to the construction of the myth. First of all it seems very hard, if not physically impossible, to cut your penis off piece by piece, then bind it and then die of blood loss, while a photographer watching you dying doesn't call for an ambulance. It is even harder to take pictures of yourself in this situation. Second, it is obvious that the model on the photographs is a blond, beard-less person, physically different from Schwarzkogler, who had dark hair and a beard.

This research led me to a re-enactment of Schwarzkogler's performance and its photographic record, in order to investigate re-enactment as a technique for the critical revision of history. I developed this performance after extensive research and exchange with the Russian artist and my partner Oleg Mavromatti, with whom I have worked since 2000. The re-enactment of Schwarzkogler's self-castration was designed in order to explore relations between the artist and the public; the myth and the document. Aiming to integrate the background story into the performance and to address the issues of photography and historical truth, I performed both an art history lecture and a body intervention. During the performance, I shared the real story about Schwarzkogler's piece and emphasized the importance of photography for the creation of the myth and the success of his work. As opposed to Schwarzkogler, I did real intervention on my body. I stitched a dildo up to my belly with surgical thread. I gave the audience photo cameras and asked them to take pictures of my action, strictly reproducing Schwarzkogler's photographic compositions. The audience was given the role of a mythology producer, an opportunity to reproduce the process of creating a mythology and investigate its specificity. The first time I enacted this performance was at Exit Art gallery in Chelsea, New York, a place that has a long history of organizing performance art events and historical exhibitions dedicated to this genre. All the viewers were allowed to intervene in the site of the performance and arrange my body to match the compositions of the original photographs.



Figure 4.2 Boryana Rossa, *Blood Revenge 2*, 2008. Performance at the Red House Centre for Culture and Debate, Sofia. The pages of the book are about Viennese actionism. Photograph: Pravidoliub Ivanov. Courtesy of the artist

This direct relationship with the audience, where the border between art action and its interpersonal interpretation is transgressed, allows a better understanding of the processes of accessing people's imagination, as well as the individuality of perception. The awareness of hierarchies allows the story tellers to demystify the master/slave relationship between the artist's personal myth and the master's narrative constructed by the institutional power of the art system.

In another of my performances entitled *About the Living and the Dead* (2006), the photographs taken by the official photographer of the event turned out very different to the ones taken by the audience. The photographic record resulted in multiple versions of the story about my

action. This piece was performed under the art group name Ultrafuturo,<sup>1</sup> together with Oleg Mavromatti. We hoped for the performance to manifest the importance of the documentation for interpretation of an artwork or event.

## The media and the social networks

In the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, along with the growth of civil protests on the streets of Bulgaria and Russia, performance art and public actions acquired wider popularity. Art performance across the whole of Central and Eastern Europe had its own unique means of expression, different from those in other countries. Frequently, the translation of the term action in the Western context gives rise to confusion, and is often associated with Viennese Actionism or with action painting. The approximate meaning of action in the Bulgarian and Russian context is an artistic act that is deliberately organized in advance with an aim to intervene with an unprepared or accidental audience. Action can also refer to a spontaneous independent or collective artistic act of a social or political nature and conducted in a public place.

Russian and Bulgarian actions refer to the *Yurodivi* (Kovalev, 2007, 9). *Yurodivi* are a particular rank of saints, who are believed to have challenged the established morality of their time. The presence and interaction with the crowd were used by them as tools to articulate their message. The *Yurodivi* often trans-dressed, and this practice related to their neglect of the body and attention to the spirit and transgression. Although there is a growth of studies of *Yurodovi*, (Panchenko, 1984; Yurkov, 2003) an historic record of their practice is still limited in the English language. The actions of the Moscow Actionists<sup>2</sup> (Kovalev, 2007, 5) especially in the 1990s were documented accidentally and only by the audience, which, as argued by critic Andrei Kovalev, was a challenge for the art historians. “This was a year and a half of a hellish labour...The artists are not photographing themselves because during action they are working” (Panov, 2008). In this context, it is important to mention that the

---

<sup>1</sup> ULTRAFUTURO is an international art collective co-established in 2004 by artists Boryana Rossa and Oleg Mavromatti. ULTRAFUTURO works in the intersection between art, technology, critical theory, human/machine identity and political activism. The group is the initiator of the International Robot Day (since February 5th 2004). Other members include bionihil, Katya Damianova, Anton Terziev, Miroslav Dimitrov and Troyt.

<sup>2</sup> Kovalev makes distinction between Moscow Actionism and Actionism in Russia. This chapter discusses specifically Moscow Actionism.

Moscow Actionists positioned themselves as antagonists of the Moscow Conceptualists, who were representatives of a different generation and of a different socio-political context. This juxtaposition we can also trace in the attitude to the documentation process. For example, the Conceptualist group Collective Actions made works for preliminary invited audiences in remote locations, most often outside the city. Since this audience was limited and elitist, the actions were designed to be recorded as a document, and perhaps reach a wider audience in a document form. Therefore, Conceptualists' actions were very well documented. Whereas, the actionists, who positioned themselves at the political left, designed their actions in an interventionist and extrovert manner; their actions were anti-elitist and were aimed to be directly experienced by the incidental viewer at the location of their happening, expecting an immediate more spontaneous public response. They were aimed to reach a variety of people, and speak to a mass audience using an accessible language. The documentation in such cases became secondary or was sometimes intentionally avoided, as Kovalev states:

“...for the Conceptualist circle the arrangement of an archive is part of the artistic work...But radicals like Alexander Brener, do not like any protocol, considering it part of a police authority machine. Avdei Ter-Oganyan and Oleg Mavromatti are emigrants because of their art. Publication of their actions could have been another outstanding tool for illegal criminal cases against them.” (Kovalev, 2007, 20)

Artists like Alexander Brenner, Anatoli Osmolovski, Oleg Mavromatti and Dmitry Pimenov, who are some of the prominent Moscow actionists, at the early stages of their art practice, stated that their actions belonged to the time and the place they were performed at and have no importance as documentation form. Other artists, such as Russian artist Oleg Kulik, often referred to as one of the main representatives of the actionists, worked quite the opposite. His work was well documented, and not being performed for a selected audience (like the performances of the Conceptualists) was meant to shock and interact with unprepared passers-by. Nevertheless, the overall neglect of material evidence did not mean that the actionists thought about their actions as of not having a historical value. They were conscious of the after-life of the piece, produced by the interpretation of the audience or the media representation. The artists used the mass-media and particularly the audience as a mythology producer in several ways. One way was to provoke the viewer's thrill in order to record a unique event, which many did with pleasure. Another was to use journalists who were eager to report about the next intervention that

happened at the time of political unrest (Kovalev, 2008, 11-12).

For example, in the 1996 one of the Actionists art-groups the Absolute Love Sect<sup>3</sup> collective invited journalists to witness the end of the world. In response to a media advertisement, the journalists and the public came to the event, the artists proclaimed that “the end of the world has been postponed” and sprayed this statement on the city walls. As a result, articles about this action were published in the newspapers. However, in the context of this essay, it is more interesting to note that recently a young user of the Live Journal (the most popular blog spot in Russia) had photographed the graffiti a considerable time after the action of Absolute Love Sect (Figure 4.3). Without knowing its history, she speculated on her blog about its possible reason of appearance as a sign left by a secret cult expecting the end of the world, adding yet another layer between reality and myth.



Figure 4.3 Absolute Love Sect, *The End of the World Had Been Postponed* 1996, Moscow (performance documentation). Photograph: LiveJournal user.

---

<sup>3</sup> The collective was established at the beginning of the 1990s by artist Oleg Mavromatti and members Dmitry Pimenov, Imperator Vava, Tanya Nikitina, Misha Nikitin. Their actions and exhibitions were performed at varieties of public places in Moscow.

This direct interaction with the media and the transgression of the boundaries of established hierarchies of information distribution is not always safe. In the year of 2000, the action entitled *Do Not Believe Your Eyes* performed by Oleg Mavromatti was transmitted during prime time on the Russian TV channel NTV on the evening news, by journalists who knew the work of Mavromatti and had visited the site of the event unexpectedly (Figure 4.4). The performance referred to his film in which he played the main role. He crucified himself in close proximity to the biggest Orthodox temple in Moscow, Christ the Saviour, which in the 1990s became a symbol of the fusion between religious and political power. This performance is still regarded as one of the most radical critiques of local politics and of the art market's destructive effect on artistic integrity. The character Mavromatti was impersonating was a painter, who killed his fellow-artist because he envied his commercial success. The killer decided to become a performance artist, and announced his criticism of the art world during the performance and punished himself by crucifixion for the murder. The performance piece, which was part of the film project, was presented on the TV as a self-standing piece. This could have been one of the reasons for this gesture to be misinterpreted. The artist was blamed for mocking and making fun of religious symbols. The reality was quite the opposite; Mavromatti used the crucifixion as a symbol of humiliation. Nevertheless after the TV screening, Mavromatti was accused of instigating religious conflicts by the Orthodox Banner Holders; an extremist fundamentalist Orthodox Christian organization, which has since built up its name as one of the major censors and persecutors of artists in Russia. As a consequence Mavromatti's artistic archive was confiscated. He left the country the same year and since then he has been living in exile in Bulgaria and the USA. According to Kovalev (2007, 5) this action marked the turning point in performance art in the region and the beginning of the more conservative and highly commercialized epoch of the 2000s.

The trend of accusing artists for being too critical of the church authorities appeared at the end of the 1990s in Russia and the wider region. The key examples are the cases of Avdei Ter-Oganian and the exhibitions *Beware Religion!* (2003) and *Forbidden Art* (2006) (Kovalev, 2007, 6).

Mavromatti's performance has been mythologized by both media and viewers of different generations, who often publish various stories on the Internet about what, according to them, took place thirteen years ago. For instance, the author of Encyclopaedia *Novye religioznye organizacii Rossii destruktivnogo, okkultnogo i neoyazicheskogo kharaktera* qualifies Moscow

Actionism and its representatives as an organized Satanist sect and refers to Oleg Mavromatti as its leader (Kulikov, 2002).

In cases such as Schwarzkogler's, the constructed and reconstructed myth worked to the benefit of the artist. In Mavromatti's case, all myths surrounding the piece did quite the opposite, they ruined his career. Regardless of the harmful nature of these myths, they appear to still be beneficial in a quite peculiar way. Nowadays, Mavromatti's performance continues to be mentioned in almost every discussion about the social role of religious authorities, by both clerics and artists. The performance addressed art as a social factor, which was the initial intention of the artist. Subsequently, the constructed discourse revealed aspects that enriched the political message of the piece, such as the transformation of the artist's intention through interaction with different ideological beliefs and diverse audiences.



Figure 4.4 Oleg Mavromatti, *Do Not Believe Your Eyes*, 2000. Video still  
Performance documentation. The microphone of the NTV seen up front  
Courtesy of the artist.

In 2010, Russian authorities refused the renewal of Mavromatti's passport, and the artist has been kept in limbo in Bulgaria for about two years. The initial threat of extradition and imprisonment in Russia was a subject of our joint performance entitled *Ally/Foe* (2010). In the performance, we arranged a public vote in which people were allowed to

vote guilty or not guilty on-line. While voting, people were able to watch the artist streaming live from home. Mavromatti was attached to a functioning electric chair, which would produce a possible deadly shock if the number of votes 'guilty' overcame the number of 'not guilty'. Some people were present during the performance in the apartment, however more interesting was the online activity. The members of the notorious 4chan.org community motivated by a TV show on the Russian TV RT mobilized their social network to vote guilty just to see somebody getting the electric shock on live stream. The on-line chat that went along with the live video stream made visible the process of myth-production without any institutional participation. Interpretations that construct and reconstruct the myth-production (in this case about the political message of the piece) obviously depended on the language, the background and the ideological orientation or political affiliations of the viewers of the performance, who also voted accordingly (Mavromatti, 2010; Narins, 2010; French, 2010). Apparently, Internet communication is very useful in researching and creating quite a deep dissection of society and its attitude to justice, art and spectacle. During the live performance (which lasted for a week) there were 6000 voters, who claimed a variety of reasons for their choice. Even now, two years after the performance, there are people who vote online and write their thoughts on Mavromatti's case. The website is a living and active documentation of these attitudes, this form of record is actually a substantial part of the performance. The active website created an everlasting life of the performance that happened quite some time ago.

As a result, a new medium for an interactive form of documentation had been created. Similarly, in the 2000s the actions of the Russian art-collective Voina, a new generation of performance artists (who claim their direct inspiration from Moscow Conceptualism, rather than from Actionism) reached its peak. Most of their actions are known exclusively from videos and blog posts made by the group members and are rarely seen live. Social network users perpetuate stories that were already fabricated by Alexey Plucer-Sarno, who is a member of the group. The users were not able to create their own versions, since a general audience didn't really see the live actions. This fact actually reproduced the familiar old monopoly over information and documentation and myth production. This production was constructed preliminary by the artists and the art-institutions that work with them. Nevertheless along with the growing popularity, the anti-authoritarian message of the Voina group has gradually started to dissolve due to the branding wars between the members (Drake, 2011) and collaboration of some with Conservative politicians such as the mayor of Prague Bohuslav Svoboda (Smirnitski Moskvicheva, 2011).



Regardless of seemingly alternative media strategies, Voina functions within the power structures in art, the interpretation of the meaning of their actions and their promotion is dominated by established institutions and empowered by the claim of accessibility, even when social networks and YouTube appear discredited.

Gender analysis of media representation in most recent performance art in Russia and the Internet actions of Mavromatti based in Bulgaria was carried out by the art historian and feminist activist Nadezda Plungian. Reflecting on Mavromatti's case and Voina's actions from 2010, she observed the interconnectedness between increasing visibility of political oppression locally and other forms of oppression such as gender discrimination at the time of growing social activism in Russia as she stated:

“Starting to understand the mechanisms of state pressure usually lead to the identification of other hierarchical structures. It is logical, that very similar attention around the same time (when actions of Mavromatti and Voina were taking place in 2010) received the topic of gender discrimination that has never sounded as prominently in our country.” (Plungian, 2010)

Plungian's text was written a year before the Russian art collective Pussy Riot had started their activity. Two members of the collective Nadezhda Tolokonnikova (a.k.a. Tolokno, former member of Voina collective) and Maria Alekhina were found guilty for offending the religious feelings of Orthodox Christian believers with their so called punk prayer performed at the cathedral Christ the Saviour in Moscow in 2012. Dressed in colourful clothes and with masks on their heads, four women got to the altar and performed their song-prayer asking the Virgin Mary to drive Putin away from power. A few days after, three of them were arrested and put in jail and after a long and spectacular process and in spite of the support from media stars (such as Madonna and Yoko Ono) around the world, two of them were convicted to two years in prison. One of the three, Yekaterina Samutsevic (also a former member of Voina) was released after spending a few months in prison.

The case of Pussy Riot reveals the political reality of contemporary Russian society: a fusion of religious and state interests, misogyny, authoritarianism, and a lack of tolerance for difference. This case became a culmination of a long sequence of similar cases in Russia since the 1990s such as the previously mentioned case of Mavromatti, or the case of Avdei Ter-Oganyan, who was the first artist in Russia to be persecuted for offence of religious feelings for his performance *Young Atheist* (1998) and

the collective cases against curators of the exhibitions *Caution Religion!* (2001) and *Forbidden Art* (2003) (Heartney, 2011, 119-123). The most important difference between these cases and the punk prayer is that the latter was performed by a women-only collective. Therefore, many of the accused have a strong gender-biased aspect as opposed to the other actions and exhibitions. Unfortunately, the case of Pussy Riot has rapidly lost its rich critical and transformative potential and started to turn into a commercial spectacle, empty of meaning. In the same text, a year before, Plungian had professed how the initial feminist pathos of Pussy Riot would be dismissed as being too personal. It has been rendered politically and artistically unimportant to most of the public debates in the shadow of the gender neutral statement against Putin. Plungian questioned methods of evaluation of art used by Russian art critics:

“Where in critical texts one usually expects social reflection or artistic analysis, almost obligatory one finds just confirmation of discriminatory schemes imposed by the legitimate trademark of formal innovation or dichotomy between relevant-irrelevant. Among them is mentioned the shame of personal statement (attributed to the world); distrust not just to someone else’s values, but also devaluation of vulnerability as a sort of social failure. In other words, the need to join the power displaces and discredits all other functions of art.” (Plungian, 2011)

Personal values or values of marginalized groups are disregarded as irrelevant and subordinated to a bigger aim, joining established power structures, and as in the case of Pussy Riot, simplified to pro or anti-Putin sentiments. Unfortunately, the group members of Pussy Riot themselves were not well articulated feminists, which has been noted and critiqued not only by Plungian, but also by other Russian feminists (for example, Lisiutkina, 2012; Akulova, 2012). This perhaps, was the reason they surrendered to the dominant interpretation of their work as only anti-Putin or anti-clerical as seen in their last statements in court in August 2012. The occasional use of the word feminism by them, didn’t contribute much to the de-marginalization of the feminist discourse since they did not have a clear opinion about urgent problems of Russian women such as domestic violence or inequality in the labour markets to name just a few (Plungian, 2013). Plungian referred to a specific example of protest, as a member of the Moscow Feminist group, who participated in the anti-governmental protests in November 2011:

“All Moscow feminists had disagreements with Nadia Tolokno as she decided not to go to Sakharov Ave [this was the meeting point of protesters] with posters where the word feminism is written because it is

‘too much’ and not to include in the posters texts regarding gender violence because it is irrelevant.” (Pungian, 2011)

This explains why Pussy Riot, even if they call themselves feminists feel it is not prestigious to be associated with any social work against violence, and also avoid making direct statements. (Lisiutkina, 2012)

The gender aspect of Russian performance art has not had much analysis. In art criticism and public discussions the actions made by men have been dissociated from the personalities who made them and treated as universal artistic statements, by that depriving their work of the potent layers of social meanings. Pussy Riot have been accused repeatedly of being witches, bad mothers, hooligans, or simply worshipped as beautiful women, but these gender related statements have not been capitalized for a more substantial feminist debate in Russia. Interestingly enough, this was in contrast to the rest of the world where they have been represented as a feminist sign (Gapova, 2012). But even in foreign discourse, the feminist element has been subordinated to global political interests. Some writers even questioned how true the fight for freedom of speech is, a leitmotiv of many Western publications:

“This isn’t about Pussy Riot and their run-in with the law, nor is about feminism or freedom of speech. It’s all political manoeuvring to make Putin look bad. That’s all there is to it. Pussy Riot is not Martin Luther King...They are “useful fools” in a scheme to sling mud at Putin.” (Whitney, 2012)

It might be relevant to look at how the documentation of Pussy Riot’s performance created their mythological aura. First, the documentation output was directed and controlled by the artists, like the traditional art-hierarchy dominated cases. Second, the media was not used by the group or by their supporters and fans to address feminist issues. Similarly to Voina, Pussy Riot directed the creation of documentation and their viewers only had the opportunity to distribute ready-made recordings (Plucer-Sarno, 2012).

The Pussy Riot performance became well known through a YouTube video, recorded by somebody who was especially invited by the artists. This recording was made without permission from the cathedral authorities. Therefore, although this was a documentation organized by the artists, it had the quality of a visitor’s video, which contributed to the impression of authenticity, a first-hand visitor’s view. This video actually appeared to be the only resource from which majority of the public was able to see the performance and the source for mythological interpretations

of the event.

As seen from the records in court, the actual punk prayer did not really happen the way it looked like on the video. The performers danced at the altar, but the soundtrack of the video was attached later. This video was also the most important evidence of their guilt (similar to the TV transmission of Mavromatti's performance), and at the same time, it was evidence used to prove the innocence of Yekaterina Samutsevic, who was released from prison. The video showed she was stopped by the guard and therefore did not manage to participate in the dances at the altar, although she was one of the organizers.

The production of documentation arises differently in the case of the previously discussed performance examples of Rossa and Mavromatti such as *Ally/Foe* (2012). In this performance, the audience were allowed to participate and later allowed to use the artists' organised and edited video records. Whereas in the Pussy Riot case the video became viral on the social networks, and communication technologies were what increased the number of the audience from perhaps not more than a dozen people, physically present at the church at the time of the performance, to millions of viewers around the world. This wide, easy accessibility made Pussy Riot one of the most popular performance art collectives, but also created many opportunities for abuse and appropriation of their work for a variety of political and commercial ends and as a result rendered their initially declared feminist message obsolete (Rossa, 2012). It seems that the technology helped the branding and the appropriation of the group's act for local and international political aims. The video of the group and their products were appropriated by agents that were not feminist in nature.

In my performance with Oleg Mavromatti entitled *Vitruvian Body* (2009) (see Centrefold), I relied on my experience of involving the audience in the documentation process. My objective was to introduce the audience to the creation of meanings and stereotypes in images through various mediums in old forms, such as drawings and new forms, such as digital photography.

The performance was a critique of the Vitruvian Man concept of the Universalist approach to human proportions, and consequently, the constructed mythical concept of the human, embedded in contemporary culture. For the purpose of the actual performance, I was stitched to a construction that re-assembles the square and the circle, in which the Vitruvian Man was inscribed. In this case, I encouraged the audience to use any available image producing device to make recordings including the close ups. I gave different instructions to photographers for their consideration. If some were interested whether the stitches were real, they

had to take close ups. If they wanted to focus on the event, they were asked to take pictures so the audience was in the frame (Figure 4.5).

From the visual feedback of the event, I understood that people's perception of the action had shifted from what they were expecting to get from it to what appeared to be their experience of the piece through imaging devices. The camera seemed to empower some to direct the distance between themselves and the performer as well as the performance itself. Technology helped to deal with the initial shock that sometimes occurs with the observation of physically intense performance actions. Also for some, technology offered an easier access and a chance to view the action from different angles, allowing the audience to experience the performance from a more comfortable distance.



Figure 4.5 Boryana Rossa and Oleg Mavromatti, *Vitruvian Body*, 2009.  
Performance at re.act.feminism, Akademie der Kunste, Berlin.  
Photograph: Jan Stradtman. Courtesy of the artists

## Conclusions

Not long ago a friend of mine, and performance artist, who writes about performance art, said she did not care if Schwarzkogler cut his penis off or not, since the myth about this work is so strong that it became truth anyway. The myth is indeed a form of a copy that often becomes an original. The dismantling of myths can produce new myths. Therefore, a myth in the production of performance art documentation is unavoidable.

If people want to believe in a particular version of the myth as truth, then that is their decision based on their own choice of fragmented information. Nevertheless, a myth can also be inspirational. For instance, if I had not heard Schwarzkogler's story, I could have been a different artist. I believe myths should be constantly challenged and questioned, taking a critical distance to the secondary productions of myths by those who critique them in the first place.

Applying queer methodology and drawing on Haraway, the everlasting dialectics between myth and its deconstruction, in the era of myth producing digital technology, should be looked at as an opportunity for action. Understanding media can help to reveal manipulation and mechanisms of power construction. Rephrasing Haraway, I would argue that new media technology is a new political language that challenges the informatics of domination (Haraway, 1991, 81). In other words, if technology is used more critically, it becomes a new language, a new way of expression, which creates adequate contemporary means for resistance and possibly a construction of a different world.

There is an illusion of control associated with the use of accessible technology. Yet, technology is not capable of liberating just by its use, it depends upon who uses technology and for what purpose. The established structures of power also use technology for the purposes of the status-quo they represent. Therefore, the digital camera and the Internet in the hands of activists or the audience are tools like any others. These tools are similar to one of the most quoted technologies of knowledge sharing; the printing press. Printed books created a power balance, a challenge to the establishment, but did not overthrow oppression.

Currently, we see the recruiting of bloggers for commercial and political causes. YouTube is also used for advertising whilst pretending to be authentic and therefore low-tech videos are made to serve the same purposes like ordinary commercials. The Internet and the media sphere, although user generated is not an island of freedom. Used to seeing the world through the camera, we sometimes lack real participation. We view the world through cameras, and we record ourselves participating in the world, while our participation is nothing more than a record of us recording ourselves at the site of happening. If we look more positively at the situation, then researching and using technology can help to reveal the workings of manipulation through its use, and help to de-construct and re-appropriate technology more critically for our own purposes. Technology offers an opportunity to join in solidarity over borders in challenging domination of universalism. These means could be used more widely by feminists, queer activists and critically minded people more generally.

## Bibliography

- Akulova, Vera. 'Konformizm v protestnoy oboetke'. *openspace*. February 27, 2012. Accessed December 24, 2012. <http://os.colta.ru/art/events/details/34649/?attempt=1>
- Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies* New York: Hill and Wang, 1972. Originally published (Paris: Editions du Seuil/London 1957).
- Drake, Stefan van 'VOINA: 'WAR' to the 4th Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art', *free-voina* October 7, 2011. Accessed December 24, 2012. <http://en.free-voina.org/post/10326186774>
- French, Alva. 'Shocking Stunt on Tap for Artist Without a Country', *Huffington Post*. November 5, 2010. Accessed December 24, 2012 [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/nycity-news-service/shocking-stunt-on-tap-for\\_b\\_779479.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/nycity-news-service/shocking-stunt-on-tap-for_b_779479.html)
- Gapova, Elena. 'The Conundrum of Pussy Riot: Feminist Protest and Class Distinctions in Russia', *academia.edu* 2012 Accessed December 24, 2012. [http://www.academia.edu/2199652/\\_Pussy\\_Riot\\_](http://www.academia.edu/2199652/_Pussy_Riot_)
- Groys, Boris. 'Art in the Age of Biopolitics: From Artwork to Art Documentation'. In Dimitry Bulatov (Ed) *Biomediale*, Kaliningrad: The National Centre for Contemporary Art, National Publishing House Yantarny Skaz, 2004.
- Haraway, Donna. 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century'. In Donna Haraway (Ed) *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, New York; Routledge. 1991.
- Heartney, Eleanor. 'The Global Culture War', *Art in America*, October, 118-123. 2011.
- Hughes, Robert. The Decline and Fall of the Avant-Garde, *Time*, December 18. 1972. Accessed December 24, 2012. <http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,945209,00.html>.
- Kostyleva, Elena. 'Bytva na nebesah', *Seans*, February 20, 2012. Accessed December 24, 2012. <http://seance.ru/blog/zavtra>
- Kovalev, Andrei. *Russian Actionism 1990-2000*. Moscow: World Art Museum WAM. 2007.
- Kulikov, Igor. 'Akcii Olega Mavromatti'. In *Encyclopedia Novye religioznye organizacii Rossii destruktivnogo, okkultnogo I neoyazicheskogo kharaktera*, Vol 7. Moscow: Palomnik. 2002.
- Lilith Performance Studio. Lilith Performance Studio, June 5, 2010. Melati Suryodarmo, *butterdance.mov*. *Youtube*. 2010. Accessed December 24, 2012. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dnPNr9yquuc>.

- Lisiutkina, Larisa. Pozytsia Nadi Plungian otnositel'no aktsui Pussy Riot *Larisa Lisyutkina Journal*, March 15, 2012. Accessed December 24, 2012. <http://shaherezada.livejournal.com/306009.html>.
- Mavromatti, Oleg. Ally/Foe, *svoichuzoi*, 2010. Accessed December 24, 2012 <http://svoichuzoi.org/>
- Morozova, Liza. Performance Around Us, *Openspace*, 2008-2011. Accessed December 24, 2012 <http://www.openspace.ru/art/projects/88/>
- Mustafin, Denis. 2010. Seriya interview s aktsionistami v ramkakh podgotovki k semkami filma o moskovskom akcionizme, *Vimeo*. Accessed December 24, 2012. <http://vimeo.com/10921001>.
- Narins, John William. 'Artist Lets Internet Users Vote on His Fate: Live or Die', *AolNews*, November 12, 2010. Accessed December 24 2012. <http://www.aolnews.com/2010/11/12/artist-lets-internet-users-vote-on-his-fate-live-or-die/>
- Ong, Aihwa. *Neoliberalism as Exception*, Durham and London: Duke University Press. 2006.
- Panchenko, A. M. 'Smeh kak zreliste'. In D.S. Lihachev, A. M. Panchenko, A. M. Ponyurko (Eds). *Smeh v drevnei Rusi*, Leningrad: Nauka. 72-153. 1984
- Panov, Alexander. 'Andrei Kovalev: My Book, My Epoch', *Kultura-portal*, no. 14 (7627), 2008.
- Plucer-Sarno, Alexey. 'The VOINA Art-Group («War») Actions 2006-2012'. *Plucer's Journal*, September 7, 2012. Accessed December 24, 2012. <http://plucer.livejournal.com/266853.html>
- Plungian, Nadezda. 'Gendernyie zerkala sovremennogo iskusstva: mezdu soprotivleniem i dedovstinoy', *Neprokosnovennyui zapas*, 2(76), 2011.
- Plungian, Nadezda. 'Feminist Art in Russia: From Women's Resistance to Queer Issues', *Sofia Queer Forum 2012*, 31-45. Sofia: Anarres. 2013.
- Rossa, Boryana. 'Pussy Riot as a Dream: Why I Support Pussy Riot, but Not the Arguments in Their Defence', *boryana\_rossa's Journal*. September 15, 2012. <http://boryanarossa.livejournal.com/46132.html>.
- Sasz, Nele. Radical Art in Russia, the 1990s and Beyond Film & Screen Media, *Art Margins*, 10 June 2003. Accessed December 24, 2012 [http://www.artmargins.com/index.php/archive/271-qradicalq-art-in-russia-the-1990s-and-beyond#ftnlink\\_artnotes1\\_9](http://www.artmargins.com/index.php/archive/271-qradicalq-art-in-russia-the-1990s-and-beyond#ftnlink_artnotes1_9).
- Sayre, Henry M. *The Object of Performance, the American Avant Garde since 1970*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press. 1989.
- Schwarz, Dieter. Chronology, *From Action Painting to Actionism, Vienna 1960-1965*. Kassel: Museum Fridericianum, Kassel, Kunstmuseum



- Winterthur and Schottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh, Ritter Verlag, Klagenfurt. 1988.
- Smirnitski, Jan and Maria Moskvicheva. 'Art-gruppa Voina берет podatchki ot czeshkoi vlasti?', *MKRU*, November 17, 2011.
- Stiles, Kristine. Notes on Rudolf Schwarzkogler's Images of Healing. *White Walls*. 25, Spring, 1990.
- Stiles, Kristine. Performance and its Objects, *Arts Magazine*. 63( 3), 1990.
- Twisty. 'Spinster aunt is informed that Pussy Riot's ideological carpet doesn't match drapes', *I Blame the Patriarchy*. August 23, 2012. Accessed December 24, 2012. <http://blog.iblamethepatriarchy.com/2012/08/23/spinster-aunt-is-informed-that-pussy-riots-carpet-doesnt-match-drapes/>.
- Ursprung, Philip. Catholic Tastes: Hurting and Healing the Body in Viennese Actionism in the 1960. In Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson (Eds) *Performing the Body, Performing the Text*, New York: Routledge. 1999. 138–52.
- Whitney, Mike. Useful Idiots of the Anti-Putin Movement? The Pussy Riot Flap. *CounterPunch*. August 8, 2012. Accessed December 24, 2012. <http://www.counterpunch.org/2012/08/08/the-pussy-riot-flap/>
- Yurkov S. E. 'Pod znakom groteska: antipowevednie v russkoi kulture (XI-nachalo XX v.)', St. Peterburg. 2003. 52-69. Accessed July 6, 2013. [http://ec-dejavu.ru/j/Jurod\\_Jurkov.html](http://ec-dejavu.ru/j/Jurod_Jurkov.html)



## CHAPTER FIVE

# IDENTITY DISCOURSE IN ANDRZEJ KARMASZ'S PERFORMATIVE ACTS: HE MAY NOT SEEM WHAT HE MIGHT BE

AGATA ROGOŚ

*“The deconstruction of identity is not the deconstruction of politics; rather, it establishes as political the very terms through which identity is articulated. [...]*

*If identities were no longer fixed as the premises of a political syllogism, and politics no longer understood as a set of practices derived from the alleged interests that belong to a set of ready-made subjects, a new configuration of politics would surely emerge from the ruins of the old.”*

Judith Butler, 1990, 148-149

### **Introduction**

This chapter addresses questions associated with the borders of cultural identity construction and gender performance, drawing on the works of the Gdańsk-based, Polish multi-media artist Andrzej Karmasz. His multi-layered works offer a wide spectrum for analysis of otherness as well as interpretation associated with the issues of performativity and transgression in the context of gender identity and border crossing. The permanent destabilization, not only of a cultural nature, but also engrained in aspects of public and private life, reflects a discourse of the contemporary culture. The works of Andrzej Karmasz refer to the mobility of contemporary societies and the dislocation of cultural values. When we become aware of the global processes of relocation and the lack of ‘permanence’, or even the need for instability, fluidity and a continuous change, in cultural and visual fields, as well as the political and social contexts, the attachment to a single identity or a socio-cultural role always

seems futile. Furthermore, the issues of cultural attachment seem to be particularly challenging to define in the context of nomadism and mobility in contemporary societies.

To what extent do regulatory practices of gender formation and division constitute identity, the internal coherence of the subject? To what extent is identity a normative ideal rather than a descriptive feature of experience? How do the regulatory practices that govern gender also govern culturally intelligible notions of identity? Inasmuch as identity is assured through the stabilizing concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality, the very notion of the person is called into question by the cultural emergence of those incoherent or discontinuous gendered beings who appear to be persons but fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which human beings are defined (Butler, 1990).

Blurring the borders between male and female sexuality, a body that transgresses corporal stereotypes becomes a more visible issue in contemporary visual culture. Inventive and ever newer social roles and the pursuit of novelty seem to determine gender construction. The debates associated with processes of defining what one's own sex is, have produced images of gender that are seen as 'sexier' than the normative polarization of male and female features. Furthermore, the terms such as unisex and androgyny are becoming ever present not only in the visual sense, but also in relation to social changes, associated with the assigned roles for men and women in contemporary societal structures and popular culture. Karmasz's artistic explorations of an anthropological nature comment on the feminization of a male body and cultural blurring of gender difference. Furthermore, he transforms into the other; that is, the 'other' that is always female, commenting on his own origin and cultural constructions that seem demarcated by a polarization of gender dualism and lack of tolerance for difference in contemporary Poland.

### **Borders of cultural identity construction**

Karmasz comments on identity construction; for him identity seems to be the object of one's quest, and thus, it needs to be continuously invented. He points out:

"What becomes most important is one's ability to sense the state of *betwixt and between*, while physically being located in undetermined places and the gradual adjustment to gestures that appear culturally unclassified." (Karmasz in Wyspa Institute, Gdańsk, 2013)

In one of Andrzej Karmasz's most recent works entitled *Celebrate* (2013), a four-channel video installation (12 min 55 sec), on one of the screens, an explosion of red fireworks (see Centrefold) is forming the Chinese word of *Shuitubufu*. This word is composed of four ideograms, among which are the signs of water and earth. *Shuitubufu* is the condition of being a stranger who is neither from 'this' water nor 'this' earth. Karmasz explores such a condition that manifests itself, as he argues, as a sort of non-acclimatisation, or as the celebration of inconveniences related to a change of place; the feeling of displacement. The phenomenon of *Shuitubufu*, a consequence of physical and mental relocation, could be defined as an obstacle for those wanting to become embedded instantaneously in a new place. Yet, for Karmasz, it is also a reason for celebrating.

A sense of fulfilment and excitement, estrangement and fear are all associated with a change of place. Distances between spaces, symbolised by unreadable territories in Karmasz's installation can be read as 'non-recommended' places or the places for a momentary location. In this work, the artist attempts to celebrate a sense of reluctance to demands that are imposed on somebody who is trying to adjust to the established existing cultural models which, paradoxically, can become unreadable, generating only *statis*. Karmasz argues that a state of celebration is an attempt at getting rid of fossilised cultural patterns in order to free alternative systems of behaviour while being suspended in-between, during the so called 'ritual of cultural passage', yet, without actually passing through.

Another of the four videos in the installation projects a green grassy meadow, a space of anywhere and nowhere. A group of young men sit on military containers in a semi-circle surrounding a gramophone (Figure 5.1). They are of similar age, looks and dressage, yet, each projects a sense of estrangement. Is it a caste of outcasts who form a non-group? Each of them, from time to time sticks out his tongue, on which the organic shapes of maps are formed, a process of 'freeing his mother tongue'. The traces of maps neither gain nor lose their form, continually in motion they remain blurred. Are these men trying to get rid of their culturally established patterns and replace them with new systems? According to Zygmunt Bauman (2004), mobility makes one's identity processual and creative in nature. However, Bauman also argues that it is likely that our own culture, in which we are in a sense 'stuck', is above all mobile, and forces us to wander. Therefore, the cultural space which has facilitated the construction of the self can lose its defining significance.

In *Celebrate* Karmasz enters a 'liminal area', that is, an area constructed as a zone in which the stranger can autonomously shape oneself as well as

the surrounding environment. The artist explores symptoms of translocation and liminality, drawing on the writings of anthropologist Victor Turner, and in particular, his concept of the liminal state:

“The attributes of liminality or of liminal personae (“threshold people”) are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between, the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions. Thus, liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon.” (Turner, 1969, 93)



Figure 5.1 Andrzej Karmasz, *Celebrate*, 2013. Video still. Courtesy of the artist

It seems that each cultural transformation is accompanied by a state of anxiety. Drawing on Zygmunt Bauman’s reflections (2004; 2000) concerning how mobility makes identity processual in nature, Karmasz points out that “societies create their own strangers in accordance with their own specificity and style” (Karmasz in Wyspa Institute, 2013). There is no representation of a society, even symbolic, which finds the presence of the other indispensable. Karmasz asks whether it is possible at all to balance a sense of being in an ‘intercultural suspension’? What

experiences do we have when changing location, when being on the move? To what extent is relocation necessary for the definition of our own identity? How can one be defined by the lack of any cultural allegiance or without belonging? And, in representation, what deformations of image may happen when one is located 'betwixt and between'?

In his cultural transformations, drawing on liminality, Karmasz seems to neglect the state of being excluded. Instead, he argues:

"The exclusion in my works is voluntary and occurs in an extremely liquid way, practically, right from the beginning. At any moment, in any environment, one can make an attempt at defining a new liminal space." (Karmasz at Wyspa Institute, Gdańsk, 2013)

In one of his earlier works, a photographic self-portrait entitled *The Unmarked Self-Portrait* (2003), Karmasz features as an androgyne with no sign of ethnicity or origin. The state of being culturally *Unmarked* acted as a departure point for his subsequent performative explorations of cultural identity constructions. In *Unmarked* and his subsequent photographic works, Karmasz investigates the state of suspension, an uncomfortable space associated with the processes of the gradual stripping off and getting rid of cultural belongings, and subsequently, merging new roles and new identities.

### **Performative experience as a cognitive working method**

It would be difficult to address performativity in the art practice of Andrzej Karmasz without referring to the theory of Judith Butler and performative acts. In the works of Karmasz it is neither sexuality nor gender constructed in isolation, but rather their interdependence that plays the crucial defining role. Therefore, it is important to address these issues whilst identifying critical debates and implications for his practice. Performative acts are indispensably connected with the notion of identity and cultural constructs, commenting on the changeability of the subject; the alterity of the person. We seem to be acting out certain cultural roles, constituting the cultural and social environment; social roles that have been enforced into our awareness through cultural consent and socialization with the dominant order of 'truth'. This kind of acting out usually opposes the performative fluency and is manipulated in order to control and regulate sexual practice. As Judith Butler claims, gender is the term artificially created by the social and cultural construction in which every single person is being implemented.

In his practice, Karmasz adopts different performative acts on at least two levels, that is; gender identity and ethno-cultural realms. Let's start with the gender construction as the most recognized and visible point of perception. Following Deborah Youdell (2006) we learn:

“Judith Butler begins with adopting Foucault’s notion of discourse as productive and uses this alongside the notion of the performative to consider the production of sexed and gendered subjects.” (Youdell, 2006, 511)

Indeed, Karmasz in his art practice becomes the producer of gendered subjects. In the video piece entitled *Silence of Taming* (2005), he reveals a wide range of issues associated with his art production. Karmasz is seen as transforming into a ‘real’ Japanese geisha. Dressed in a Kimono with a new hair style and wearing make-up, the artist enters the confrontation between the other and the new cultural context. The new geisha appears rather tall. The new geisha is not a woman and is not a native of Japan. For a moment, the viewer can be lost not knowing if this is a finished work or a documentation of the performance, or even a documentary film about the artist. We, as viewers, are included in the process of Karmasz’s acting. We become hidden observers witnessing the performative process from the backstage. Such a working perspective is present in most of Karmasz’s works, and from such a perspective, the artist de-constructs identity, framing his analysis to include reflections on the formation of gender discourse.

*Silence of Taming* was realized in Tokyo during Karmasz’s two years long art residency. The work itself consists of a video - that is, a documentation of the performative process as well as the series of photographic portraits of the Geisha transformation (see Figure 5.2 and Centrefold). The preparations for this project were very strenuous as the artist comments:

“I was going to the meetings in Asakusa (old district of Tokyo), it was over at least two weeks. One day, on a very hot day, we met and she dressed me in a kimono for the first time. I started to resemble a geisha in the Tokyo style. My walk on the streets was exhausting; the journey was long, in 34 C degrees, with too many layers of clothing, I felt like I was tied up and I couldn’t move. Suzono was the one who created me, but she would sometimes let me choose the accessories. The wig was extremely heavy, weighing several kilos; I wasn’t even able to hold my head straight as it would torpidly fall aside. Later on, already as a geisha, I went out to the streets of Asakusa and it was a totally new experience. In the previous transformations, I had never felt confident enough to blend into a foreign



society so it was all very stressful for me. As I was sneaking along the narrow streets, it turned out very quickly that some of the Japanese were taking me for a geisha. The presence of Suzuno added authenticity to my transformation. She was known as a geisha and I was authentic in her company. I was only allowed to walk around the places, where one can meet geishas very rarely. For the company of geishas and the possibility to look at them, one has to pay a lot.... as a respectable geisha I couldn't hang around in the center of Tokyo sweating in over 30 C. Suzuno was scolding me all the time – for the wrong posture, holding the kimono in the wrong way, making too big steps, and not moving smoothly enough. After all, she was my okaasan and wanted me to do my best. Nevertheless, she was proud of me.” (Fragments of the author's interview with the artist, the exhibition *Moving*, the Baltic Sea Cultural Centre, Gdańsk, 2006)



Figure 5.2 Andrzej Karmasz, *Self-portrait. Geisha*, 2003. Courtesy the artist

Karmasz attempts to overcome taboos associated with the clash of cultures, breaking the cultural boundaries of difference. He learned from the Geisha the way to look and the gaze, how to position the body, how to wear the Kimono, how to move, and walk. The work touches on gender-based power issues, which might not be so obvious from the outset. The

relationship between a master and an apprentice, which is usually based on patriarchal and masculine structures, in this piece seemed reversed. In this case, it was a woman who was teaching a craft to a man, and possibly highlighting a clash between occidental and oriental perspectives. As Judith Butler (1997) observed:

“The one who names, who works within the language to find the name for another, is presumed to be already named, positioned within language as one who is already subject to the founding or inaugurating address. This suggests that such a subject in language is positioned as both addressed and addressing and that the very possibility of naming another requires that one first be named.” (Butler, 1997, 29)

In this category of the power of language, or even better let's define it as the power of naming, we are following a given trajectory, a social model of gender relations and a version of history which constructs specific identities and ways of thinking. If we follow Judith Butler's argument, and accept the fact already that the naming of problems connected with culture may differ, depending on which tradition one is speaking from, we need to accept that we may never be able to be objective in the processes of communication.

### **A ritual of passage**

In his work, Andrzej Karmasz draws on a concept defined in anthropology and ethnology as a rite or a ritual of passage (Gennep, 1960). In a ritual of passage, every change in a human being's life is constituted by two spheres, one sacrum and one profane. The sacrum sphere 'collects' almost all life activities and the life of the individual is always based, no matter which type of society it represents, on a successive passage from one group to another. This way of perceiving the social reality might also be found in Karmasz's art practice and his experience of different cultures; a transformation process based on a transition from one cultural meaning to another, from one social group to another, from one gender to another. Parallel to traditional rituals found in many cultures, Karmasz's work can be divided into several acts or parts. According to Van Gennep (1960), these phases are characterized by an inclusion (pre-liminal rituals), a transitory period (liminal rituals) and a second inclusion (post-liminal rituals); and all of these phases seem to be present in Karmasz's practice. The first phase is linked with the process of research and preparations for the change, or to be more specific, a transformation. From the preparation phase of the ritual of passage and from the transitory period, Karmasz

adopts the in-between status that defines his artistic process. It can be perceived a very safe position, oscillating on the border between the preceding forms of identification and becoming something else or somebody new.

Karmasz creates his own rituals, which are not part of a traditional culture; they are rather a kind of disruption of the natural order or cultural system. Nevertheless, the changes he makes through his performativity are part of the culture he enters into. His performative acts become a sort of reinterpretation, identifying not only with the traditional issues but also, exposing the cultural values. Karmasz's interference reconstructs the views of established cultural systems and through deconstruction comments on the problems of local cultures in a globalized world of symbols.

*Silence of Taming* (2005), *Yang Kuei Fei* (2005), *Feet above the Ground* (2006) or *Self-Portrait Nigerian woman from Fulani tribe* (2007) (Figure 5.4) are all based on a similar semantic structure; Karmasz seems to adopt a similar structure of acting. For example, *Yang Kuei Fei* (see Centrefold) is a video piece that draws its title from the name of a famous Chinese beauty that died tragically in 756. She was the concubine and the favorite wife of emperor Xuanzong from the Tang dynasty, and her legend frequently appears in Chinese opera. The project was made in collaboration with the Beijing Opera. At that time, in April 2005 the Chinese protested in front of the Japanese Embassy in Beijing, because of the authorization to print a controversial handbook trivializing the war crimes of the Japanese towards the Chinese, which made the transformation into Yang Kuei Fei somewhat problematic for the Japanese public in the beginning.

In the video we witness the whole process of Karmasz's learning and transforming into a cultural other. Explaining the transformation process, he reflects:

"I was planning a trip to Shanghai and Kunming and had already started to think of the transformation into the Chinese Yang Kuei Fei. In the meantime, in Tokyo I met artists from the Beijing Opera - Cho-Sho-Sei Group and China Star group from Jokohama. They helped me with this project. The process of characterization itself was very strenuous for me: for more than two hours master In Shuzui and his assistant Chan Chinhoi were working hard so that I could become the Chinese Yang Kuei Fei. My previous identity began to vanish and there appeared gradually more and more layers binding my body. All the accessories, pins and a crown – before they put it on me, my head was all wrapped with long straps. More straps were wrapped around my chest and neck. In the end, I found it hard to keep balance - and, as a matter of fact, the word balance was used a

couple of times while placing the straps and crown on. Afterwards, In Shuzui told me that now I am the Chinese princess Yang Kuei Fei and left me in front of the mirror so that I had time to get used to this entirely new and strange image.” (Fragments of the author’s interview with the artist, the exhibition *Moving*, the Baltic Sea Cultural Centre, Gdańsk, 2006)

The artist is not the only one who observes cultural discourse. The artist is being observed by the discourse and becomes a part of it, being caught in the trap of the limits of his own language and culture. Another of Karmasz’s performative projects entitled *Feet Above the Ground* (2006) was realized in Thailand and is dedicated to the culture of the Akha people (*Self-portrait. Woman from Akha Tribe* (2008), Figure 5.3). The construction of this work is slightly different than the other examples previously mentioned. Here, the artist becomes partly a researcher, partly a tourist, dreaming of the ride on the elephant, and encountering local tribes located behind distant mountains. The Akha people are a nomadic group forced by the authorities to constantly move and change their place of settlement, nomads against their will.

Traditional societies and cultures are usually perceived as being very hermetic and structured around their rituals and life cycles. With Karmasz drawing upon more traditional types of cultures, which appear very distant from the occidental tradition, it is arguably more challenging. The artist attempts to enter different cultures cautiously and almost invisibly. He attempts to look at a culture of the other as much as possible from the inside. It could be argued that such a perspective can potentially offer a deeper knowledge and more possibilities for his performative transitions. Karmasz described the Akha people’s project as follows:

“I went to Northern Thailand, to the provinces Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai. I wanted to do a project with the nomadic ethnic group Akha. I was anxious to appear in the village exactly at the time when the annual festival was taking place. So, the chances were that I would either make it or not. And I didn’t. Villages are situated very far in the mountains, it is known that only people from a certain ethnic group get there, and surely the Thai don’t go that far. I wanted to find a village where the festival - Swing Ceremony - would take place. By the main road leading to the village an enormous swing was installed. During the Swing Ceremony, each year young girls decorate their heads for the first time and by swinging enter the stage of womanhood. By experiencing the swinging ceremony, I would become a rightful Akha woman. But it turned out that the ceremony didn’t take place and suddenly I found myself there as an Akha woman. The population of the village took it lightly.” (Fragments of the author’s interview with the artist, the exhibition *Moving*, the Baltic Sea Cultural Centre, Gdańsk, 2006)

Although in this case, Karmasz claims, the Akha group was not too disturbed by his transformation; his presence was inevitably associated with the manifestation of the other. Most of all, he becomes the other on a gender level, and this is the most visible aspect of his performative acts. Karmasz aims to make a cultural change in the perception of himself by himself, himself by the other, and last but not least, the other by the other.



Figure 5.3 Andrzej Karmasz, *Self-portrait. Woman from Akha Tribe*, 2008.  
Courtesy the artist

Jacques Lacan's notion of the mirror phase that refers to the relation between the object and its image can be applied to the works of Andrzej Karmasz, as the artist is continuously working with the image of himself, trying to define himself through the processes of ongoing change and transformation. It seems that shaping or mentally constructing the image of the self is usually based on the gaze of the other, as with Lacan's mirror phase, implying that the transforming object tries to create his or her image on the basis of apprehension of the other. This process leads to alienation and possibly to cultural exclusion, which subsequently leads the object to create himself as the image constrained by the other. What appears particular in the works of Andrzej Karmasz is a constructed multi-

layered vision of identity, a vision of the object versus the other. As Levinas (1997) states:

“The other manifests itself by the absolute resistance of its defenseless eyes. The infinite in the face brings into question my freedom, which is discovered to be murderous and usurperatory.” (Levinas, 1997, 294)

Karmasz also becomes the other on the axis of opposition between East and West or Occident and Orient. There will always be some kind of knowledge, experience, history and tradition that stands behind its speaker, and in that sense, it may not be possible to stay neutral, to be without any perspective. In the works of Karmasz, a narrative always emerges from a different perspective than that of the subject of speech. It could thus be argued that the presence of the gaze of the other will always be noticeable, and from such a perspective the gaze should be discussed. Yet, at the reception end of Karmasz's works, a phenomenon of a double mirror can emerge. Cultural material can potentially be re-transformed twice over, which allows the viewer or more specifically the object to see him or herself through the eyes of the other but placed in his own familiar environment.

The issues of opposition of the West and the East discourse have been extensively investigated in postcolonial discourse, as in Edward Said's *Orientalism*. In this work, Said argues that there is no such phenomenon like Orient, meaning East as a subject of research in the fields of linguistic studies, archeology or history, and that the concept of the Orient is an invention, and not an objectively existing reality. It constructs a frame, where apparent facts are immediately saturated with anticipations and fantasies. Postcolonial discourse appears adequate when analyzing the works of Karmasz, and from such a perspective several issues emerge. First, the position of the other appears simultaneously in the postmodern and postcolonial discourse. Second, there is a question of representation. There is a question of how to represent something which was erased from the official discourse and how to refer to it. Third, the experience of the impossible and the representation of subalterity are put into question.

We have already discussed the dimension of the other. Now we can proceed to discussing the issues of representation and subalterity. We may be asking the crucial question: how does one represent other cultures? Edward Said offers equivocally that, this is what approximates reason and Imperialism; it is the category of representation understood as a replacement of the otherness with an enforced, constructed identity. The question that arises here is an ethical one, and is related to representation. How to represent something that was erased from the dominant systems of

representation or was hidden under the surface of an apparently transparent discourse? Following Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1987), we could argue that the nature of discourse makes a researcher or an engaged intellectual accessory in the permanent reshaping of the other, conceived as a shade of our Ego.

How can one apply the postcolonial discourse in Karmasz's works? It is very important to show some of the relations between contemporary cultural studies and cultural critique, and the problems that Karmasz highlights in his coherent oeuvre. In his works, if we take them either for stylish and splendid photographic portraits of Japanese and Chinese women, or performative acts of transgression enacted in his video works, there appears something more, something very important, which is a self-distance based on a wealth of research that precedes the work.



Figure 5.4 Andrzej Karmasz, *Self-portrait. Nigerian Woman from Fulani Tribe*, 2007. Courtesy the artist

There is also a sense of ease in applying the *clichés* of different cultures in his work. Nevertheless, the artist is somehow caught in the trap of the convention with which he plays. The traditional ways of representing women in the East, in a very rigid manner, seem to be in

opposition to the somewhat humorous video documentation of Karmasz's works. And maybe that makes the works of Andrzej Karmasz particularly interesting.

In the context of postcolonial discourse this kind of representation, as Said would claim, is the replacement of the otherness with an imposed identity. Or, to express it another way, it is a constructed fantasy towards the non-existent image of the Orient. On the one hand, all the works by Karmasz fit the aesthetics of a fairytale, a magical vision of the Orient, and of course this is far from reality, and reinforces the constructed stereotypes. On the other hand, by referencing mostly historical periods, Karmasz creates and comments upon artificially constructed realities.



Figure 5.5 Andrzej Karmasz, *Crystal Clear*, 2007. Courtesy the artist

### **Conclusions: On performing identity**

The performative identities created by Karmasz are based on the notion of a permanent change. Performativity is realized by the interaction between the artist and the reality that surrounds him either with the viewers or the social groups that directly or indirectly participate in his performative acts. His works comment upon alienation and solitude, and the suppressed desires of contemporary culture. It is inevitably an illusion



of the spectator that accompanies the reception of Karmasz's works. This illusion is multiplied in several areas. Most of all, images created by Karmasz are delusively located within spaces demarcated by the 'feminine'. In his explorations, he has transformed into a variety of the cultural other, always adopting new roles, and new identities. Each transformation has been associated with a gender framing, a comment on the gendered dimensions of identity construction in relation to the other.

A number of transformations made by the artist are unequivocally identified with women's images taken in the contexts of distant cultures such as the Geisha, the Chinese princess Yang Kuei Fei, Maori, Thai dancer, a woman from the ethnic group Akha or from Fulani tribe. We are being seduced by the game that the artist plays. Perhaps we should seek the elements of seduction in this series of 'Self-portraits'. In fact, there is something catchy in these self-portraits, representation of the other that seduces the viewer. As viewers we are absorbed by the world of culturally constructed realities. Yet, there is also a kind of anxiety, which results from the deception behind the images we are looking at.

The works of Andrzej Karmasz are in a sense, a fulfillment of the process of absorption and seduction. It is not about the way in which the viewer is being deluded. Images of women in contemporary culture have been determined through uniform commercial aesthetics, imposed by the multibillion dollar fashion industry and celebrity culture. Karmasz, in his attempts to incarnate other women, introduces historical and cultural traditions of representing female imagery. In doing so, he suggests a different dimension; an emphasis is put on the cultural other rather than sexual transformations. From this perspective, 'transition of sex' seems to complement the whole process of transformation. The transition of cultural identity - an attempt to overcome, avoid one's own culture and to incarnate a strange unfamiliar context - may seem at first glance very superficial. However, the transformation is more complex because of the blending of two layers: entering into different, other culture and adopting a different sexual role. We are left with a sense of alienation and a feeling of isolation, associated with encountering 'strange' culture through Karmasz's realizations.

His works also display the problem of dissimilarity and estrangement. This problem in Karmasz's work refers to nomadism conceived as a lifestyle that may result in the abandonment of one's roots, the lack of cultural identity and the escape into the void of relativism. The artist comments on oppressive gestures within one's culture, which generate equally oppressive solutions. Still, there is a question which cultural context is more alien? Is it a transformation, deformation, shaping ones-

self or one's own identity? We are in the end, moving around solely in the world of illusion, fantasy and fascination.

In short, Andrzej Karmasz in his artistic practice explores processes associated with a border crossing that is cultural in nature and always gendered. He comments on crossing over the cultural boundaries, such as infiltration of a new cultural setting, a becoming of the other and tries to achieve cultural assimilation or even cultural integration. Karmasz's practice is very much based on the experiencing and sensing of the world, a phenomenological approach which results in his performative acts. Through his critical investigations, he attempts to recreate what may be conceived as 'reality'.

It seems difficult to distinguish the boundaries between the uses of video camera in Karmasz's art making and the documentation of his practice. The blurring of these boundaries, it could be argued, places his art in the wider context, including the fields of contemporary anthropology, cultural studies and folklore studies. The artist might be playing with the viewer's perception through his imagery with the help of a lens, but he also attempts to represent the world of otherness through his performative acts. It might be a kind of epistemology through art that is being executed here by performativity.

## Bibliography

- Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*, University of Michigan Press, 1994.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. *Identity*, Cambridge: Polity Press. 2004.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. *Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity Press. 2000.
- Burzyńska, Anna and Markowski, Michał Paweł. *Teorie Literaturne XX wieku*, Kraków 2009.
- Butler, Judith. *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*. London and New York: Routledge. 1997.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble. Feminism and Subversion of Identity*, London and New York: Routledge 1990.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, Baltimore John Hopkins University Press, 1997.
- Said, Edward. *Orientalism*, Pantheon: New York, 1978.
- Richard Schechner. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, New York and London: Routledge 2005.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, New York and London: Routledge, 1987.

- Turner, Victor. *The Ritual Process Structure and Anti-structure*, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1969.
- Youdell, Deborah. 'Subjectivation and Performative Politics: Butler Thinking Althusser and Foucault: Intelligibility, Agency and the Raced-Nationed-Religioned Subjects of Education', *British Journal of Sociology of Education* Troubling Identities: Reflections on Judith Butler's Philosophy for the Sociology of Education, 27( 4): 511- 528. 2006.
- Gennep, Arnold van. *The Rites of Passage*, London and New York: Routledge, 1960.



# CHAPTER SIX

## BURIED SITES OF MEMORY, JEWISH DIASPORA AND THE OTHER

INGA FONAR COCOS

### Introduction

Memory refers to a diverse set of cognitive capacities by which we as human beings retain information and reconstruct past experiences, usually for current purposes<sup>1</sup>. Memory is one of the most important means by which our histories animate our current actions and experiences, and thus can be defined as the storage of events marking the human psyche. This chapter addresses the links between memory and oblivion in the context of the migration associated with the 20th century Jewish Diaspora. The questions about remembering and forgetting will be explored. More specifically, how can these invisible domains of human cognition be represented by the use of technology?

Contemporary Israeli society consists of, among others, European Jews who settled in Israel after the Second World War, as well as native born Israelis. In the process of emigrating, after the Second World War, from various places in Europe to the newly established state of Israel in 1948, the memories of many individuals were challenged by the political ideology which rejected the image of a weak Diaspora Jew. The tension between memory and history, between the historical record and other narratives, regarding what can be conceived as the past, as well as the adaptation of new narratives are examined in the context of the Israeli society of today.

By discussing and analyzing the examples of my video works entitled *Between Homelands* (2008) and *Name* (2009) I, Inga Fonar Cocos - an Israeli artist, born in Warsaw, Poland and currently living in Tel-Aviv,

---

<sup>1</sup> The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy online. Stanford University.

Israel - will reflect upon and discuss two paradigms of memory; relating to an existence and an absence of trauma in the context of memory and its influence on the formation of personal identity. These paradigms are mapped onto the background of cultural changes associated with the political transformation of the Israeli state. In this context, the role of the historical record is juxtaposed with the processing of personal memory.

### **Narratives of history and the Israeli State**

During the 1990s, Israeli state ideology constructed a new narrative and its own version of history. In part, this new narrative emerged as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union, and more broadly, the opening of the borders between Western and Eastern Europe, resulting in the ensuing mass wave of immigration from Russia to Israel. The Diaspora Jew suddenly became a legitimate citizen; the so-called new Israeli. Oz Almog (1997) points out that these changes allowed Israeli society to psychologically channel a new version of history and to challenge the myth of the Sabra or the 'rugged' native Israeli. Sabra was the term coined to describe the native Israeli, born between the 1930s and the 1940s, and educated in the ethos of a love of the land. The Sabra was designated to be the 'new Jew', an opposite of the 'old Jew', the Holocaust survivor.

It was only in the 1990s, the lacuna of memory associated with a formation of identity created during the immigration process, was addressed. Anita Shapira (1997) in her book *New Jews, Old Jews*, discussing the construction of a new and an old Jewish national identity associated with the consequences of the post-war Diaspora, distinguishes the 'private' memory from the 'public' memory. According to Shapira, the Holocaust has been a central discourse, appropriated by the state of Israel in the construction of a collective identity. The Holocaust was associated with exilic Judaism, which perpetuated the image of anti-Semitism. The Holocaust accounts and the war-related memories were conceived as belonging solely to the state of Israel. The memory of the Holocaust was turned into an anonymous memory through a public discourse, and as a consequence, portrayed as a collective memory, not a private experience or an individual account. Shapira (1997) refers to several Israeli historians, including Avi Shlaim, Ilan Pape, and Simha Flapan who in the late 1980s addressed the historical events of the years spanning from 1947 to 1952; the events which were connected to the establishment of the state of Israel, the 1948 independence war, and the subsequent political agreements:

“For those historians one can say, history begins in 1948, this was their common denominator... Moments of historical breakthrough turned into “a myth” ...They declared that everything written before on the theme of the establishment of the state is merely a Zionist propaganda... this polemic had extensions which deviated from the 1948 experience and from the domain of history, and discourse spread across the fields of sociology, anthropology, political science ...and combined with the polemic about the interrelations between the establishment of the state and the Holocaust, between Zionism and the Jewish Diaspora.” (Shapira, 1997, 19-21)

Shapira mentions, among others, the writings by Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, a lecturer in Jewish History at the Ben Gurion University, Israel, who discussed a “negation of Diaspora” and defined it as a “lack of attentiveness and un-openness of Zionism to the outsider and to the difference”. Raz-Krakotzkin also argued for so-called “affirmation of Diaspora”, an openness of Israeli society towards those who appear different from the ‘new Jews’, offering them legitimacy and alternative collective memories (Shapira citing Raz-Krakotzkin, 1997, 19-21).

Shapira (1997) further elaborates upon the first two decades after the Second World War, and argues that this period was presented as:

“A period of repression of the Holocaust in the Israeli consciousness; in that period the Holocaust was but a marginal component of the solidification of the Israeli identity. It was not a focus of a public discussion... people did not want to hear about the Holocaust, did not want to talk about the Holocaust... the struggle for establishing the state, and later, the independence war pushed aside the Holocaust shock and its impact. In the established heroic state there was no room for weakness and humiliation... There was no dispute about the existence of the phenomenon of thrusting the Holocaust to the margins of the Israeli agenda; it was accepted by historians and publicists, and was expressed in the popular press and television. It was used as a central component in the severe indictment against David Ben-Gurion, who is identified as the father and founder of the state, and against the first Sabra generation, who did not understand, did not try to understand, ignored or erased on purpose the memory of the Holocaust.” (86-87)

The Holocaust discourse was constructed as a myth, a version of history whereby personal accounts and private stories were suppressed. Private memories could not compete with the persisting discourse of a collective memory in a newly born state. Moshe Zuckermann (2001) asks: “what is the essence of the Holocaust?” He quotes the idea of Theodor Adorno on “the increasing human practice towards the total erasure of the individual, and its conversion into a granule swallowed by a ‘completely managed

world”” (Zuckermann, 2001, 75). Zuckermann argues that un-remembering the helplessness of the Holocaust’s victims and deriving a Zionist conclusion from it, as an ideological lesson of the state of Israel, betrays the victims and can be perceived as an act of ignorance. Only the universal categorical imperative for preventing a recurrence of Auschwitz can purport to remember this unimaginable rupture in civilization:

“Has the state of Israel remembered it? Has the particular ‘lesson’ that Israel asked to draw from the horror not betrayed the universalistic meaning of its scope and essence? Has the ‘victim’ not betrayed the victims?” (Zuckermann, 2001, 80)

According to Zuckermann, there is an inherent contradiction between the universal and the particular memory of the Holocaust. The particular or the national version precludes the universal or the proper version of Holocaust memory. Historian and journalist Tom Segev, in his book *The Seventh Million: Israelis and the Holocaust* (1991) also refers to the notion of manipulated memory. He deals with the attitude and relations of the Palestinian and Israeli Jews to the Holocaust. By reconsidering the major struggles and personalities of Israel’s past, including Ben-Gurion and Begin, he argues that the nation’s legacy has, at critical moments of the *Exodus* affair, the Eichmann trial, the case of John Demjanjuk etc., been molded and manipulated in accordance with the ideological requirements of the state.

Drawing on writings of Shapira (1997) and others mentioned above, it could be argued that not only the memory of the Holocaust was repressed, but at the same time, in the first two decades of the existence of the state of Israel, historians, publicists and the media emphasized the role of the Israeli as a dominant ‘macho’ figure in the construction of the state ideology and in nurturing the myth of heroism.

### **Inner workings of memory**

Since the ‘cell’s memory’ or the genetic code of human DNA is passed from generation to generation, human beings are, biologically determining, the memory of the past (Ringrose and Paro, 2004). At the same time, we contain what will become the memory of the future. French historian Pierre Nora (1989) argues that:

“Memory and history, far from being synonymous, appear now to be in a fundamental opposition. Memory is life, borne by living societies...it remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and



forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation.” (Nora, 1989, p. 7 and p. 25)

In one of my installation works entitled *The Other* (2003), memory is represented as a soft writing tablet upon which images, events, and the accounts of the past are imprinted and etched (Figure 6.1). The question is what can a black wax tablet mounted under a Plexiglas support on the wall represent? Is it an archeological find, an object from the past or an object of the future? A line of written letters can be seen on the tablet’s waxy surface, writing created by the process of inserting pins into the wax. Yet, letters seem to be partially covered by what may look like ash from a volcanic eruption. The process of inserting the pins was realized by a pricking of the fragile membrane of the skin containing, holding in, and concealing the chaotic inner flux. This inscribing process designates the wound, the mark made by a pin and results in a written sentence. This so called constructed *punctum*, drawing on a concept of Roland Barthes, (1981) is where the process of marking by the pins points to the viewer’s process of seeing:

“A Latin word exists to designate this wound, this prick, this mark made by a pointed instrument: the word suits me all the better in that it also refers to the notion of punctuation, and because the photographs I am speaking of are in effect punctuated, sometimes event speckled with this sensitive points...I shall therefore call it *punctum*; for *punctum* is also: sting, speck, cut, little hole - and also a cast of the dice. A photograph’s *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me).” (Barthes, 1981, 27)

The process Barthes (1981) describes can also be related to an experience of the black void or a sense of the impossibility to penetrate what may be a historical testimony, experience of another reality, or another personal history that is inherited in the writing. The writing on the tablet’s surface reads: ‘The invisible other the invisible culture the invisible reality’. It is a reference to the notion of the invisible, advanced by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1968):

“Principle: not to consider the invisible as *another visible* “possible”, or a “possible” visible for another: that would be to destroy the inner framework that joins us to it. Moreover since this “other” who would “see” it - or this “other world” it would constitute would necessarily be connected to our own, the true possibility would necessarily reappear within this connection - the invisible is *there* without being an *object*, it is pure transcendence, without an ontic mask. And the “visible” themselves,

in the last analysis, they too are only centered on a nucleus of absence.”  
(Merleau-Ponty, 1968, 229)

Merleau-Ponty (1968) goes on to argue that the invisible is what is not actually visible, but could be hidden or situated elsewhere; what, relative to the visible, could nevertheless not be seen as a thing (including the existential of the visible, its dimensions, its non-figurative inner framework); what only exists as tactile or kinesthetically, etc. (257)



Figure 6.1 Inga Fonar Cocos, *The Other*, 2003. Image courtesy the artist

*The Other* refers to several aspects associated with the process of remembering and forgetting. In antiquity, a wax tablet was associated with the idea of an ‘inner surface’ of the soul, with the receptiveness of human consciousness and its affective dimensions, as well as with memory. Kenaan (2009) points out that due to the unique qualities of wax, it historically served as a writing material, as a support for etching or stamping and, indeed, as a tool of memory. Wax becomes an embodiment of the relationship between materiality and memory. Yet, not everything can be inscribed upon the tablet of memory. Just as light is absorbed in the black tablet, so memory can ‘eat up’ certain impressions, in particular those impressions that the human psyche is unwilling to process or unable to represent. In a sense, the tablet of memory can be seen as a selective device. It never shows everything, and does not express anything that may crack its surface.

## **Paradigms of remembering and forgetting: Jewish post-war Diaspora**

In this section, I will map two alternative paradigms of memory onto my recent video works: first, a paradigm that highlights the process of forgetting by denying memory, while forming a new identity in the post-war Diaspora context; second, an antithesis of the first, a paradigm that describes a pursuit of memory as a process of delving into memory gaps, motivated by the will to embrace and to integrate the missing memory pieces, in an effort to broaden the construction of identity. I examine these two memory paradigms, drawing on the concrete examples of the Jewish Diaspora after the Second World War and the formation of a new Israeli society. I attempt to address a few questions. How do memories of the past influence the present? How in contemporary Israel, do migrants from Europe, conceive their personal identity as a state of being between two homelands? What happens internally during this process of Diaspora? What is the 'internal' migration route? What does a person choose to adopt in the migration process? What is buried under the layers of oblivion? In my recent video works, I attempt to represent these internal workings of memory associated with the Diaspora experience, illuminating the linkage between memory, history and the processes of migration; analyzing what is present but what may also be obscured.

*Name* (2009) is a 19 min 45 sec video (see Centrefold) that deals with the process associated with a change of names through immigration. The video features five interviewees, representing five individuals that had to change their name after relocation to a new geographical and cultural environment, and therefore, lived a period of their lives under a different name from that given to them at birth (Figure 6.2). *Name* deals with the process of name changing which also characterizes the notion of the wandering Jew, always emigrating and changing his/her environment. Dealing with memory and pain, through the interviews with five individuals, the film is a comment upon the inner conflict of the characters and their confrontation with society. The interviewees were photographed with a still camera and their stories were recorded, but their voices are not heard in the film. Fragments from the interviewees' stories appear only through subtitles. The video is comprised mostly of still images, slow movements and close-ups of their faces and hands.

The video documents words which are not spoken. The inner conflict of the characters and their confrontation with Israeli society are further accentuated by the slow motion in the film. The original sound track is based on the fragments of their stories transformed into a sound-text piece

that is chanted through whispering by a vocal artist, reflecting the multiple layers of feelings and projecting the ‘inner-conversation’ of the characters.



Figure 6.2 Inga Fonar Cocos, *Name*, 2009. Video stills. Courtesy of the artist

Wilhelmina (Figure 6.3) is one of the interviewees featuring in the video, a woman who emigrated in the late 1940s from Eastern Europe to Israel, where she still lives today. She represents the paradigm of forgetting, suppressing memory due to trauma associated with the experience of relocation. Wilhelmina explains:

“When I came to see the school nurse, she asked me what my name was and I said Wilhelmina. And she said: ‘what kind of name is this?’ ‘So I will be Zeeva’, I said, because my grandpa was Wolf. ‘You – Zeeva? You weigh 19 kg. We will call you Ziva!’ ‘What a name, Ziva? I was afraid...’”  
(Wilhelmina, in Inga Fonar Cocos, *Name*)

Ziva was the new Hebrew name given to Wilhelmina. In front of the camera, at a certain moment, the concealed memory which Wilhelmina had so hermetically sealed was suddenly exposed. She cried. During my interview with Wilhelmina (not to the camera), she also explained that after many years of psychotherapy, she was expected to overcome these impossible memories and feelings of shame and inner rupture. Wilhelmina raised a crucial question: What is the significance of the shame? She continues to live with a sense of shame that affects her whole being, her very identity. She lives with a vast lacuna, denying a memory of her childhood, as well as her given name; indeed, in her own words – while still living, she buries alive a part of herself. Wilhelmina explains further:

“My mother never called me Ziva among friends, she called me Wilushiu, and I felt ashamed... With the name Ziva, I erased that identity. With the settling down in Israel, Wilhelmina was buried deep down. I saw Wilhelmina not fitting in, I was quiet. Wilhelmina could give away that little girl I was. I was a kid of the war, at the age of 3, in a Protestant orphanage, struggling for my life. I wanted to fit in at any price.”  
(Wilhelmina, in Inga Fonar Cocos, *Name*)



Figure 6.3 Inga Fonar Cocos, *Name*, 2009. Video stills. Courtesy of the artist

Wilhelmina’s personal biography is told in simple words; she does not use familiar cultural locutions with given significance (i.e. Holocaust, trauma, loss, etc.). It is she herself confronting the event; not a history of facts, but a history of a person. Wilhelmina understood that when she emigrated, the transmission and conservation of collective values and an entire history of painful events were to be sharply cut off. Instead, a new identity and a new name signaling this new identity were bestowed upon her. From that point in time, she was to have new future memories. As a result, it became all but impossible for her to contain certain parts of herself. The internal gaze was substituted by the external gaze, that is, by the newly constructed cultural conventions. She experienced a brutal eradication of personal memory by a new dictatorial history.

When I was working on the video *Name*, I took two major decisions concerning the audio dimension of the work. First, I decided for the absence of the interviewees’ voice. The decision was taken intuitively, and only post factum I analyzed the reasons which led me to make the interviewees voice absent. After listening repeatedly to all the recorded interviews, I decided that I did not want to produce an archival documentary. Instead, I wanted to channel a more condensed image as well as to mediate projected feelings of the interviewees and the worlds they represented. What was important for me were the words chosen by

the interviewees, the silence between one sentence and the next, and the difficulties of verbalizing the memories, which seemed to bring about their lives and their complex identities. Second, I decided to use a silent film technique, using subtitles as images, thus, giving the words narrated by the interviewees a visual representation. I felt that the words and the names of the participants should be heard, and should be part of the soundtrack of the video. What also added to the final soundscape in the video was a decision to use a preliminary language, comprised of the particular syllables and low whispers, which accentuated an emotional charge, and yet, transgressed the meanings of narrated words. This process resulted in a soundtrack chanted by a vocal artist, comprising of some layered repetitions of the voice, giving the video a sense of emotional space, and creating the impression of the inner-talking of the interviewees.

*Testimony* by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (2008) draws on the crises of witnessing in literature, psychoanalysis and throughout history. Felman and Laub write about the distinction between the subjective and the objective in narrating history, which is significant in the process of understanding the interviewees in the video work *Name*. They quote Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*:

“The term history unites the objective and the subjective side, and denotes ...not less what *happened* than the *narration* of what happened. This union of the two *meanings* we must regard as of a higher order than mere outward accident; we must suppose historical narrations to have appeared contemporaneously with historical deeds and events... Can contemporary narrative historically bear witness, not simply to the impact of the Holocaust but to the way in which the impact of *history as holocaust* has modified, affected, and shifted the very mode of the relationship between narrative and history?” (Felman and Laub, 2008, 97-98)

Felman and Laub (2008) draw on *The Fall* by Albert Camus, relating to the silence of a person who was an accidental witness to a suicide, and never told about it or reported it. Felman and Laub call it an act of silence (138-139). Referring to the meaning of silence, they mention that Camus had accused Sartre for not condemning Stalin's oppression and the Soviet concentration camps. That by doing so Sartre was denying the actual existence of the camps. This kind of silence becomes an erasure of the victim's cry, as well as the witness's cry, according to Felman and Laub (p. 141). The authors claim that silence is not only the absence of the act of talking, but also a refusal to know and to recognize that something has happened. In my view, this definition of silence, and the dynamics of

silence, echo the mental and psychological state of the interviewees in the video *Name*.

In the case of Wilhelmina, by remaining silent about her past memories and events, she erased them as if the events never happened, never existed. She adopted the looks, the style and the jargon of the local Sabra. Hers is not a testimony in the regular, common sense, but a testimony directed inward, towards her inner self. The complex case of Wilhelmina lies in her being a victim, and simultaneously, by her own erasure of her cries and a need for compassion and comfort.

It is often silence that is referred to as the most authentic communication that takes place. The absence of the interviewees' voice, especially in the video *Name*, has a function of a Lacuna - the impossibility to speak and explain something which is associated with a traumatic experience. Felman and Laub (2008) point out that this kind of Lacuna can be seen in the documentary film *Shoah* by Claude Lanzmann which presents testimonies by survivors and witnesses who in crucial and emotionally loaded moments became silent, unable to account for their stories (191-211). A process of silencing, similar to the witnesses' experiences in Lanzmann's film, occurred when I was interviewing Ziva/Wilhelmina for the video *Name*, in particular in a discussion about her childhood during the war. Suddenly, she was not able to carry on talking. She leaned back on the sofa, diverting her eyes towards the ceiling, trying to swallow her tears. She was not able to testify about something which threatened to crack the seemingly solid identity she had built and nurtured for years, since her emigration to Israel.

A different approach to past memories and to the testimony about the past events can be seen in the case of Jan, another interviewee featured in the video *Name*, who during the war kept writing notes about his experiences and events, and subsequently wrote a book about his war-related memories. An echo of his attitude can be found in Laub's quotes from a video testimony of a survivor (from the Yale University's archives) who says:

"I told myself, I want to live after Hitler's days, after the war is over, so I can tell the story." (Laub in Felman and Laub, 2008, 84)

Laub observes that the survivors not only had to survive in order to tell their stories, but that they had to tell their stories in order to survive. Jan uses the same words when describing his efforts to encourage himself to live: "I have to live in order to tell the story". This gave him the mental and emotional strength he needed to survive. But, Laub argues:

“there will never be enough words in the ‘dictionary’ of thought, memory and speech to tell it.” (Laub in Felman and Laub, 2008, 85)

This ‘allegation’ of Laub may have been in the back of my mind when making the decision not to use the interviewees’ voices in the video. On a personal note, the fact that my father, who lost his family, his first wife and a small child during the Holocaust, and never spoke about it, could have been a factor of this decision as well.

“This is the story of a man marked by an image from his childhood.” is the opening narration in the first voice of Chris Marker’s film *La Jeteé*. Chris Marker, artist, writer and film maker influenced my work and my research on the paradoxes of memory, in particular concerning the linkage of memory and trauma. The inclusion of the past that lives on within a person as an image, as a secret, was revealed to me when interviewing the participants of the video work *Name*, as well as when reflecting upon my own experience when working on another video work entitled *Between Homelands*. Marker points out:

“Nothing sorts out memories from ordinary moments. Later on, they do claim remembrance when they show their scars. That face he had seen was to be the only peacetime image to survive the war. Had he really seen it? Or had he invented that tender moment to prop up the madness to come?” (Chris Marker, *La Jeteé: Ciné-roman*, 1962)

The elusiveness and psychological complexity of the processes of remembrance and oblivion, and the ability to survive a trauma which Marker refers to, is the essence of my own research and practice. Marker, who investigated the cultural memory of the 20th century in a subtle but incisive way, wrote in the text for his film *Sans Soleil*, a meditation on the nature of human memory:

“I will have spent my life trying to understand the function of remembering, which is not the opposite of forgetting, but rather its lining. We do not remember, we rewrite memory much as history is rewritten. How can one remember thirst?” (Chris Marker, *Sans Soleil*, 1983)

He describes in a philosophical and visually intense manner the inability to recall the context and nuances of memory and how, as a result, the perceptions of personal and global histories seem to be affected.

Another paradigm of memory that I want to explore is about remembering, not forgetting. It is about digging into the memory gaps in order to integrate the missing pieces of history into a complete story. The video *Between Homelands* (2008), attempts to address the paradigm of



remembering (Figure 6.4 and Centrefold). This video was inspired by a collection of postcards from the 1940s and the 1950s which belonged to my parents and was kept in a large photo album, the black-and-white photographs that were taken after their return to Warsaw in the aftermath of the Second World War, and the photographs that I took during my sojourn in Poland in 2007. This was, for me, the starting point of a voyage in time and in place.



Figure 6.4 Inga Fonar Cocos, *Between Homelands*, 2008. Video stills.  
Courtesy of the artist

Between the Baltic Sea and the Mediterranean Sea, a panoramic Polish landscape seen from a moving train accompanies a narrated story of constant impermanence, projecting a sense of impossibility to settle down anywhere in the world. The movement and the changing landscapes are parallel to the movement between reality and memory, flashes of remembrance and moments of reflection. The moving images (the film consists mostly of still images) evoke an awareness of time – fleeting time, dreamlike time, gaps in time, and memories of time. By bringing together the images of the present and the represented dimensions of the past, the film reveals hidden ties between remembering, trauma and the self. In reviewing this work, Galia Bar-Or points out:

“The moving train and changing landscapes parallel the movement between the realms of reality and memory, flashes of remembrance and moments of reflection. This film successfully translates Fonar Cocos’ three-dimensional language into a flow of moving images that motivate changing rhythms of consciousness, while also harbouring a continuum of absence - a dark screen devoid of images.” (Bar-Or, 2009, 16)

When I was a child, I had a ceramic owl standing on a bookshelf in my room. An owl appears in the video as an indication of what is about to come next. In the scene with the owl, its gaze suddenly turns from one direction to the opposite. This is the signalling moment for the narration to commence, when a poem is about to be recited. This owl appears also in the video in homage to Chris Marker and his studies of cultural memory of the 20th century expressed in various mediums, including photography, cinema, writing and video art. Bar-Or (2009) discusses the fluid boundaries of the term home in *Between Homeland*:

“Fonar Cocos touches upon this ‘untouched thing’ (in the words of David Avidan, Israeli artist and poet)...her journey does not circumvent sites of blindness and disruption; it traverses biographical regions and represents worlds both near and far, hoping for the place where one may touch on understanding without touching.” (Bar-Or, 2009, 17)

My curiosity and my urge to acknowledge and confront history, concealed in the images of my parents’ postcards and their photo album, made me to go back to Poland. My aim was to collect present time photographs of the same places, and attempt to decipher the significance and the context of the old photographs and the world they suggested, shrouded in what I had come to think of as a ‘white fog’, or strangely familiar and unfamiliar feelings these uncanny representations projected.

It was both a strange and pleasant feeling to be back in my native land. I had vague memories of Warsaw, since I left as a child, and it was my second visit to Poland as an adult in 2007. Actually, I first visited Poland in 1996 for only a short period of time as I was afraid of the feelings it would evoke in me. I had a happy childhood in the Warsaw of the late 1950s and I was afraid of a possible disappointment when facing the sights of my childhood.

The video has a non-linear narrative structure and juxtaposes the images of the beautiful present-day Saski Gardens in central Warsaw, the Mediterranean beach of Tel-Aviv, *The Ghetto Heroes Monument* in Warsaw of 1948, commemorating the Warsaw ghetto uprising of 1943, the selection of the family photographs and the abstract images of a white void, embodying the changing rhythms of consciousness and aiming to reveal the affinities between remembering, trauma and individuality (Figure 6.5).

The words recited in the video are from a poem by the Polish poet and writer Stanisław Barańczak. The poem is entitled *Only Porcelain*. His poetry is dominated by ethical and political concerns as well as literary criticism. I was acquainted with Barańczak’s poetry in 2007, on the

occasion of my sojourn in Warsaw. Two women, an older woman (my mother) and a young woman, recite the poem:

“If porcelain, then only the kind you won’t miss under the shoe of a mover or the tread of a tank; if a chair, then one not too comfortable, lest there be regret in getting up and leaving; if clothing, then just so much as can fit in a suitcase, if books, then those which can be carried in the memory, if plans, then those which can be overlooked when the time comes for the next move to another street, continent, historical period or world: who told you that you were permitted to settle in? Who told you that this or that would last forever? Did no one ever tell you that you will never in the world feel at home in the world?” (Stanislaw Barańczak, *Only Porcelain*)



Figure 6.5 Inga Fonar Cocos, *Between Homelands*, 2008. Video stills.  
Courtesy of the artist

An older-sounding voice repeats after the younger-sounding voice; two generations are represented. The course of time seems to be reversed; here the older generation follows the younger generation’s reciting. Allen (2011) points out that recitation, used as the sound track, was a means of telling stories and passing history from one generation to the next, in order to preserve the collective memory and the cultural identity. Yet, something in the inter-generation transference of memory has been distorted here. Perhaps, using a female voice narration could indicate a concealed connection to a matriarchal function in society. It seems that it is ‘she’ who is perceived as the one responsible for the transference of memory.

Moments of the void are represented as a white or a black screen. Nothing happens, just the sound of a moving train can be heard and voices of the two women reciting-telling-repeating some lines of a poem: “Did no one ever tell you that you will never feel at home in the world.” The monotonous voices, in a monotonous rhythm against the background of

monotonously moving train, accentuate a meditative-like state, evoking a sense of a journey, a sense of going on and on, as if in a loop. At times, the voices disappear and only the monotonous sound of the rail tracks can be heard. Against the black void screen, a whispering voice of a little girl asks: “What will happen? Where are we going? When are we arriving?”

In the video, silence represents the voices of people who are not able to speak, or perhaps who are not among the living. This silence also refers to the silence I personally experienced from my father, who could never speak about some memories of his past. It may also refer to a child’s gaze, observing the incomprehensible past with the silent eyes.

Grover-Friedlander’s analysis (2002) of the silent dimension in the human voice illuminates the use and the construction of sound in my video-works *Name* and *Between Homelands*. In her essay *The Voice and the Gaze, the Lost Voice of the Opera in the Silent Movie*, Grover-Friedlander claims that the matching of the silent movie with the operatic voice may indicate an indirect relationship between the two. In the case of *Name* – it is chanting, whispering etc. Grover-Friedlander points out that the medium of Opera touches that which is beyond, it points to the edges of expression and to the decomposition of the voice up to the degree of insignificance, thus, revealing the materiality of the voice. The cry and the dumbness are things which exist at the edge of the vocal expression. This edge actually creates an analogous situation between the silent movie and the operatic voice (Kenaan and Grover-Friedlander, 2002, 109-113).

This could also possibly imply that the sound track in my videos put the voice under a threat of its own loss, in the realms between existence and disappearance, and its dissolution into silence. It could serve as an additional component of the projected emotional impact directed towards the viewer.

### **Closing comments**

Both paradigms of the workings of memory that I have discussed in this chapter refer to the dictatorship of history and its effect on the personal process of remembering.

The taboo to talk about the Holocaust which ruled Israeli society up to the 1990s, materialized in an ever-lasting internal wound. The work *The Other*, a wax tablet is a symbolic object representing the fragile nature of memory. The surface of the wax could be compared to a mere thin skin whereas a tablet is a container of a violent, explosive energy of a memory, threatening to burst out of control. This reflects on the story of Wilhelmina and the process of denying her personal biography, which is shared by a

whole generation and which reveals something important about contemporary Israeli society. Israel emerged as a community of immigrants that has paid a hefty price of partial self-death for suppressing memories and surrendering to the constraints of the history's grand narrative.

*Between Homelands* is a work that represents a different generation, a generation that seems liberated from the ideological injunction to forget the past, motivated to embrace the unknown, often traumatic memories. In his book *Blindness*, Jose Saramago describes the predicament of a man suddenly stricken by white blindness as that of swimming in a milky sea:

“Abandoned in the middle of the road, feeling the ground shifting under his feet, he tried to suppress the sense of panic that welled up inside him. He waved his hands in front of his face nervously, as if he were swimming in what he had described as a milky sea, but his mouth was already opening to let out a cry for help...” (Saramago, *Blindness*, 4)

A sense of blindness is usually associated with darkness, symbolized by a black color. Saramago describes a situation in which blindness is represented by a blind person as a sea of milk, as a white color. This could also refer to human inability to see through a fog, and a sense of disorientation. It was precisely a sense of disorientation that I experienced in an attempt to put together connecting pieces of the documentary material in my work.

## Bibliography

- Allen, Jennifer. ‘Editorial, How Memory Has Changed’, *Frieze*, 141, September, 2011.
- Almog, Oz. *The Sabre – A Profile*, Am Oved: Tel Aviv. Hebrew Ed. 1997.
- Bar-Or, Galia. *Inga Fonar Cocos: Viewer’s Version, How to Touch on Understanding without Touching*, Museum of Art, Ein Harod, Cat., 2009.
- Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981.
- Felman Shoshana and Laub Dori. *Testimony*, Resling Publishing: Tel Aviv Hebrew Ed. 2008.
- Kenaan, Hagi. *Inga Fonar Cocos: Viewer’s Version, Where Are The Invisible Trains Headed?* Museum of Art, Ein Harod, Cat., 2009.
- Kenaan Vered Lev and Grover-Friedlander Michal (Eds.) *The Voice and the Gaze*, Resling Publishing: Tel Aviv. Hebrew Ed. 2002.
- Marker, Chris. *La Jeteé: Ciné-Roman*,  
<http://www.markertext.com/index.htm>

- Marker, Chris. *Sans Soleil*, [http://www.markertext.com/sans\\_soleil.htm](http://www.markertext.com/sans_soleil.htm)
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *The Visible and the Invisible*, Northwestern University Press: Evanston, Illinois, 1968.
- Nora, Pierre. 'Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Memoire*' *Representations* Trans. Marc Roudebush, 26: 7-25, Spring, 1989.
- Ringrose Leonie and Paro, Renato. 'Epigenetic Regulation of Cellular Memory by the Polycomb and Trithorax Croup Proteins', *Annual Review of Genetics*, 38: 413-443, 2004.
- Saramago, José. *Blindness*, Ha-Kibbutz ha-Meu had Publishers, Hebrew Ed., 2000.
- Shapira, Anita. *New Jews, Old Jews*, Am Oved: Tel Aviv. Hebrew Ed., 1997.
- Segev, Tom. *The Seventh Million: Israelis and the Holocaust*, Keter Publishing, Hebrew Ed., 1991.
- The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (SEP), Online Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Stanford University.
- Zuckermann, Moshe. *On the Fabrication of Israelism, Myths and Ideology in a Society at Conflict*, Fetish: A Series for Cultural Studies, Tel Aviv Resling Publishing. Hebrew Ed., 2001.

**PART III:**

**CURATING THE BORDER:  
PUTTING POLITICS OF GENDER  
ON THE AGENDA IN POST-SOCIALIST  
EUROPE**





## CHAPTER SEVEN

# NEW MEDIA AND INTIMATE DEMOCRACY: VIDEO ART OF FEMALE HOMOEROTICISM

PAWEŁ LESZKOWICZ

### Introduction

For centuries patriarchal societies have rendered female homoeroticism invisible in the dominant discourse. However, throughout history art has produced a multitude of female homoerotic representations. This chapter discusses examples of video art that address the question of female homoeroticism. The Polish artist Izabella Gustowska and the Slovakian artist Anna Daučíková participated in the group show *Ars Homo Erotica*, which I curated at Poland's National Museum in Warsaw in 2010 (Leszkowicz 2010, 196-205). The video works discussed here deal with the themes of female-centred iconography and the notion of homoeroticism. Both artists, Gustowska and Daučíková are considered the pioneers of feminist video art that originated in Central and Eastern Europe, as they engaged with the medium of video in the 1980s, at the time of political and systemic transition in the region. The development of their gender conscious art culminated in the revolutionary decade of socio-political transformations in the 1980s and the 1990s, and coincided with a multimedia and video turn in their careers. Now, both are professors of new media and video art at Polish and Slovakian Fine Arts Academies respectively, and have been instrumental in educating and promoting generations of new media artists across the region.

While curating the exhibition *Ars Homo Erotica*, Gustowska's and Daučíková's video installations were showcased at the centre of a gallery room in a section entitled 'Lesbian Imagination', which acknowledged the artists long term focus on female centred themes and form, and located their practice in a broader international context. This chapter discusses the strategic concept of locating Gustowska's and Daučíková's inter-textual

and multimedia practice in relation to historical and contemporary queer art, originating in Central and Eastern Europe in particular.

The exhibition *Ars Homo Erotica* presented over 200 artworks, ranging from Antiquity to the 21st century, including Greek vases with Sappho and frolicking youths, male nudes by the 'old art masters and art mistresses', alongside contemporary queer art. The exhibition proposed a homoerotic perspective on the entire collection of the National Museum in Warsaw, and the art of the Central and Eastern European region positioned more broadly. Works from the collection of the National Museum, as well as works of invited contemporary artists surveyed cultural history from a homoerotic male and female view point. Such a perspective pointed to an alternative canon of art history, and we could argue love, liberated as much as possible from the hetero-normative filter. The notion of homoeroticism was conceptualised as an aesthetic and erotic quality of visual representation. The selection criterion for the exhibition was not the artist's sexual orientation, but rather the theme or context of the work. *Ars Homo Erotica* was involved with the revision of the National Museum collection, addressing at the same time volatile and polarising queer politics emerging and forming across the Central and Eastern European contexts. Since the fall of Communism, a trend of queer activism and art started to develop more rapidly in the region. Now such trends are at the centre of social and political struggle for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) rights and freedom of expression. Thus, the show had a strong social dimension, combining art history with contemporary politics. In order to systematise the multitude of representation, actions and metaphors, the exhibition was divided into several thematic sections aimed to juxtapose historical and contemporary works of art, each entitled: 'Time of Struggle', 'Male Nude', 'Male Couples', 'Archive', 'Transgender', 'Lesbian Imagination', 'Homoerotic Classicism', and 'Saint Sebastian'. All these themes merged the discourse of politics, eroticism, and aesthetics. Izabella Gustowska's and Anna Daucikova's works were central for the 'Lesbian Imagination' section showcased in the exhibition.

The aim of 'Lesbian Imagination' was to present the continuum of female homoeroticism which has been present in the history of culture, from Antique vases to contemporary art of new media. The exhibition placed historical and mythological themes which represented lesbian motifs for instance; images of Sappho, goddess Diana and the nymphs or Queen Christina of Sweden, alongside contemporary photographs and video installations. The presented images were purposefully trans-historical, and created predominantly, but not only, by female artists. The

diversity of the selection was meant to underline the richness, complexity and continual representation of female love and eroticism. Themes which I would argue continue to be largely invisible. Homoerotic female-centred art included scenes of love between women, female nudes and portraits, depictions of lesbian icons and their precursors, as well as representations of the social issues connected with lesbian identity. One of the characteristic elements of this type of art is the focus on themes and figurations of femininity, female portraits as well as the uncanny images of the female body, and without references made to the male agent.

### **Isabella Gustowska's new media art history**

The Polish, Poznań based artist Izabella Gustowska explores visual art and film history in her video projects. She assembles a video archive of female icons and images drawn from cultural history and mythology. The dialogue between history and the present, painting and video was embedded not only in the construction of 'Lesbian Imagination' in the exhibition, but also in the structure of Gustowska's artwork. Her video installation entitled *Love/Rose* (2005) was screened centrally on the floor and functioned as a model of the entire section in the exhibition (Figure 7.1). Collated from found footage, *Love/Rose* encapsulates representation that assembles various scenes of love or moments of intimacy between women enclosed in the structure of a red moving crystal. These scenes act as video quotes from famous masterpieces of art history, including the Pre-Raphaelites, Raphael, Ingres, Girodet and Manet. We can see close-ups of the faces of women in ecstasy, kissing angels, Olympia, Ophelia, as well as the Christian visions of the Annunciation and the Visitation. Invariably, however, recurs one painting or its fragments, the famous anonymous enigmatic portrait of *Gabrielle d'Estrees and One of Her Sisters in the Bath* (1595) of the Fontainebleau School. This particular painting is a royal allegory and a strange erotic scene involving two women. It depicts two nude sisters in a bath together, with one reaching over to the breast of Gabrielle d'Estrées, holding the nipple in her fingers. At the same time Gabrielle d'Estrées shows her ring to the viewer. Gustowska with her camera plays with the variety of takes and deformations of this famous image (see Centrefold). In her video installations, different representations of love and femininity are expressed by means of a combined language of painting and video. It was a principle of a dialogue between old and new media, and historical and contemporary art images of female homoeroticism that organised all the

art pieces in ‘Lesbian Imagination’, in a space which was signified by the moving crystal used by Gustowska in the *Love/Rose* installation.



Figure 7.1 Izabella Gustowska, *Love (Rose)*, 2005. Video installation view. ‘Lesbian Imagination’, *Ars Homo Erotica* exhibition, National Museum, Warsaw. In the background photographs by Catherine Opie and paintings by Mirella Karadjova. Photograph: @Paweł Leszkowicz.

The same portrait of Gabrielle d’Estrées which Izabella Gustowska makes reference to in her inter-textual ‘video game’ with the history of art was also used by Serbian born, Berlin based artist Tanja Ostojić and Slovenian born, Ljubljana and Vienna based artist Marina Gržinić. Ostojić’s artistic practice is discussed in more detail in chapter 2 in this volume. Ostojić and Gržinić’s photograph, entitled *Politics of Queer Curatorial Positions: After Rosa von Praunheim, Fassbinder and Bridge Markland* (2003), represents the artist personified by Ostojić and the curator personified by Gržinić, and posing as Gabrielle d’Estrées and her sister (Figure 7.2). In the space of the exhibition, the photograph by Ostojić and Gržinić was hung on the wall in order to create a dialogue with Gustowska’s video projection on the floor. Several contemporary feminist artists identify themselves with homoerotic iconography, often appropriating and reinterpreting images of early modern art. Also included in *Ars Homo Erotica* were the painted fantasies of male artists expressed through the depiction of early mythology. This inclusion helps us to understand how the lesbian-driven imagination developed through the

ages, and the construction of its archetypal images. Renaissance and Baroque artists for instance used a variety of myths and motifs, including Venus, Diana and her nymphs, the Amazons and various takes on bathing women, to express female homoeroticism (Saslow, 1999, 105-109), and as a result, mythological and courtly themes are often full of sexually exploitative images. This female archive framed in the patriarchal tradition of art is frequently the focus of contemporary feminist artists' appropriations, like in the case of Gustowska's remaking of art history through her installation.



Figure 7.2 Tanja Ostojić and Marina Gržinić, *Politics of Queer Curatorial Positions: After Rosa von Praunheim, Fassbinder and Bridge Markland*, 2003, photograph and *Portrait of Two Women*, 19<sup>th</sup> C. painting (Unknown, German). 'Lesbian Imagination', *Ars Homo Erotica* exhibition, National Museum, Warsaw. Photograph: @Paweł Leszkowicz

It seems that today it is mostly women artists who represent lesbian themes and set the tone of the discussion on non-hetero-normative female eroticism and subjectivity. In the past, when the life of women was more limited to the private sphere where access to education, including the arts, was largely inaccessible, it was predominantly men who determined the order of representation. While queering the collection of the National Museum, I decided also to show early modern paintings by Federico

Cervelli and Charles van Loo that depict the goddess Diana, who also featured in Gustowska's *Love/Rose* installation.

Diana, the goddess of virginity, represents unmarried women and is associated with the moon, the woods, and nocturnal female ceremonies. She is also the signifier of lesbian allusion amongst the ancient mythological deities. The church authorities for centuries considered Diana a prohibited heathen idol and condemned the ecstatic ceremonies devoted to her. As the Greek goddess Artemis, the sister to Apollo, Diana was the symbol of female independence and nature. In Baroque art, she was often depicted as the leader of a feminine court of nymphs, dancing or bathing in forest streams. Such representations of naked bathing women and the playful nymphs allowed artists to experiment with homoerotic subtexts. For instance, the nymphs and Diana with their touches and caresses were often represented as an inaccessible world for men. Although erotic iconography of Diana and the nymphs was created by male artists, and usually for the pleasure of other men, this does not necessarily imply that these works could not have been perceived as an alternative erotica in private female only circles. We could argue that a certain duality and contradiction in such ambiguous representations, as well as certain receptiveness to different sexual interpretations, confirm that there was an audience for more independent feminine embodiment and homoeroticism (Simons, 1994, 81-123).

Made in response to a more hidden and subversive dimension of masculine driven mythological art, the exhibition presented examples of new media interventions by contemporary feminist artists. A sound and photographic installation, entitled *Trickster/Confession Chair* (2010), by the Polish-born and Warsaw-based artist Aleksandra Polisiewicz, appropriated the rococo painting by Charles van Loo, *The Kiss of Diana* (mid-18th century). The artist enshrouded the old work of art with lesbian confessions, originating in contemporary Poland, also making references to contemporary church practice. The mysterious damage to the painting by van Loo, the scratched eyes of Diana, has been preserved, yet the origin of the destructive act is unknown. Discovered in the storage of the National Museum, the painting was displayed in relation to Polisiewicz's photograph, showing a representation of her and her girlfriend embracing in an Arcadian landscape, the idyllic nature of Diana's court. The negative attitude of the Catholic Church towards Diana was referenced in the sound installation, a wooden confessional chair where the viewer could sit down and listen to the secret recording of Aleksandra Polisiewicz's real confessions of her 'lesbian sins' whispered to a priest in a Warsaw church. During the exhibition the archbishop of Warsaw was trying to censor the

work. Yet, he encountered a fierce opposition from the director of the National Museum Piotr Piotrowski who commissioned *Ars Homo Erotica*.

The critical dialogic strategy of feminist artists to appropriate, in a subversive homoerotic way, the old patriarchal iconography of femininity was addressed in another video installation in the exhibition. This time the artist reworked and rearranged the representational gender codes of the contemporary mythology of mainstream and cult cinema. Polish-born and Germany-based Magdalena von Rudy created the video installation entitled *Carrie versus Miranda* (2003), the work was inspired by two classic feature films: Brian De Palma's horror *Carrie* (1976) and Peter Weir's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975). In the spaces of found footage, projections and mirroring based on the scenes from those two films, Magdalena von Rudy staged an erotically charged exchange of looks between Carrie and Miranda, the two teenage girls, hallucinatory heroines of these films. The emergent female homoerotic quality of the representation of the women re-emerges from the artist's appropriation, and seductively draws the viewer into a play of gazes.

### **Anna Daučíková's intimate and multi-sensorial embodiment of video**

Anna Daučíková may well be considered one of the pioneers of contemporary female art from the Central and Eastern European region who experimented with the representation of sexuality from the position of lesbian feminism and eroticism. Zora Rusinová (2009), commenting on Daučíková's practice, argues that:

“The courage with which she investigated taboo themes of individual and gender identity is remarkable. Until she came along, these were virtually unknown in Slovak art.” (Rusinová 2009, 130)

Daučíková, an artist and activist, is an outspoken member of Ganymedes, a Slovak Gay Rights group, actively involved in the queer movement in her native Slovakia and across the Central and Eastern Europe more widely (Holt and Pisarova, 2002, 1). She is one of the co-founders of *Aspekt*, the first Slovakian feminist magazine that was launched in 1993 during the first feminist conference in Slovakia. She is head of the Video and Multimedia Studio at the Academy of Fine Arts and Design in Bratislava. She examines the issue of female erotic desire and its representation and in her art practice she reflects on, and attempts to find alternative ways of showing female pleasure and corporeality, going

beyond typical erotic figurations. Using metaphors, deformations and synesthetic imagination, she constructs a different image of female eroticism, beyond the hetero-normative visual matrix.

In the three video films by Daučíková including *Kissing Hour* (1997), *Queen's Finger* (1998) and *Mulholland Drive* (2003), shown in *Ars Homo Erotica*, oral and tactile stimulation appear transferred through the video image. In *Queen's Finger* (1998) (3 min 50 sec) a pair of worn female hands hold a thick glass round receptacle, with the base facing towards the camera (see Centrefold). The thumb of the left hand begins to slowly massage the other hand and the outside rim at the base. Slowly, the thumb works backward to the opening where it hovers in anticipation before entering. Stroking the sides and moving freely in the empty space, it then spins the inside wall of the base. The glass becomes both the object and a lens through which the action can be seen - distorting the size of the hands, magnifying the thumb, refracting double images, forming a barrier as the thumb is pressed up against it, and causing the camera to occasionally lose focus. Confusion builds up as the rhythm of the thumb's massage speeds up and intensifies with pressure, forcing the receptacle to amplify the vibrations of the rubbing. At the end, the thumb slows again, relaxing, retreating back into the empty space and leaving altogether.

In *Mulholland Drive* (2003) (3 min 47 sec), the camera looks down on an old serrated butter knife, pointed upwards to reflect the female hand which slowly moves it around and upwards towards the camera (Figure 7.3). A whispered dialogue begins between Betty and Rita as they decide to share a bed, the scene alluding to David Lynch's film under the same title. An unfamiliar pink round object enters the shot out of focus. The hand rotates and rubs the object taking up the whole screen. The knife re-enters and gently rubs against the object, the serrated edge increasing the sound and suspense, while atmospheric cinematic orchestral music and the sound of heavy breathing in the background. As the words 'I love you so much' are heard, the knife hits the object revealing it to be an egg, and releasing the thick liquid inside. The hands pull apart the egg, allowing the yolk and white to fall out over them.

*Kissing Hour* (1997) (39 min 35 sec) is a series of shots lasting between ten and twenty seconds, with each interval fading into black (see Centrefold). Each shot is a close up of lips or tongue, pressed behind a plastic or glass. For ten minutes only, transparent or translucent screens are used. Lips and tongue are seen moving across the object in a one-way kiss, frequently forming a dark black pulsing hole of the mouth, and occasionally moving just behind. A thin plastic cover, patterned with flowers, empty plastic pill packets, a thin metal rod, a tank of water, a set



of wire strings begin to intermittently replace the glass and plastic films. At one point, the mouth is chewing a morsel of bread. There is variation in the speed of the movements, and pressure against the object. The continuous series suggests intimacy unceasingly mediated by the objects and the screen of the video itself.

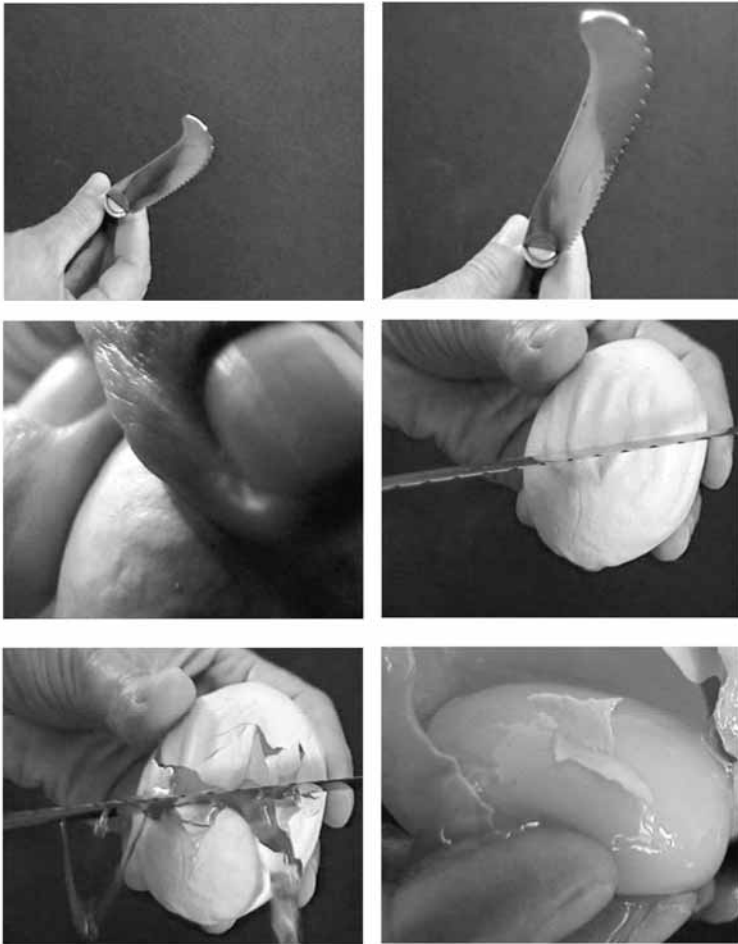


Figure 7.3 Anna Daučiková, *Mulholland Drive*, 2003. Video stills.  
Courtesy of the artist

All the three films show how Daučiková tries to convey, through the gaze, sense of touch, taste and even smell. In this way her technological video surfaces appear more corporeal and visceral. Achieving a *sensualisation* of the visual, the artist dislocates the traditional male hierarchy of the representation of the senses. Her experimentations parallel the feminist rethinking of the sensorial realm, exemplified for instance in the writing of the French philosopher Luce Irigaray (Jay, 1994, 535-538). Moreover, the focus on orality and fingering uncannily suggests lesbian eroticism. Though the reading strongly depends on the gendered and sexual position of the viewer, it is provoked by the deep sensual exploration of the unconscious, and of the moving and pulsating images embodied in the video. To achieve this optical effect, tactile stimulation plays an extraordinary role, projecting the gesture and sounds of touch and rubbing of a variety of surfaces. Daučiková's tactile games indirectly comment on the fact that from about the 2nd century and for some time, lesbians were referred to as 'tribads'; from Greek '*tribas*', meaning to rub, to massage (Norton, 2012, 1).

The three video films by Daučiková were screened in consecutive order as a big projection on the wall, on the opposite side of the room from Gustowska's video installation. An unusual and unique archaic object was placed in the vicinity of Daučiková's projections in the 'Lesbian Imagination' section of *Ars Homo Erotica*. The National Museum in Warsaw has in its collection a Greek vase; a painted kalpis vase, with the image of the poetess Sappho with a lyre, created in Athens circa 510 B.C. *The Kalpis with Sappho* is attributed to the Painter of Sappho, and executed in a very rare technique called 'Six'. Sappho lived at the turn of the 7th and 6th century B.C. on the Greek island of Lesbos and is an archetype of lesbian identity as well as one of the greatest ancient female poets. She was the first to express female eroticism and the love experience, and she did so addressing other women. Hence the female language of love in Western culture has lesbian origins. Here, the poetess is portrayed with a lyre and garlands, alone or surrounded by young women. She ran a school for women, teaching them poetry and music, under the protection of the goddess Aphrodite. Since Sappho's works were destroyed in late Antiquity, she became the symbol of female homoeroticism, which was consequently obliterated or hetero-sexualised. For centuries, in Antiquity and in the Middle Ages, Sappho remained the only icon of feminine-centric genius. Out of the nine books of lyrical poetry by Sappho, approximately 200 fragments and a few full poems have survived. Her poetry focuses on sensual gardens, smells and colours of herbs and flowers, music played on lyres and songs sung by dancing

girls. Sappho's literary metaphors are tactile; they underline the pleasures of discovering the textures of the body, of flowers and of fabrics. It is a vision of floral female sexuality and sensuality, based on synaesthesia (Saslow, 1999, 19-21). The video films of Anna Daučiková also have a synesthetic quality, evoking tactile and olfactory senses through visual means.

In 'Lesbian Imagination', the queer feminist radicalism of Daučiková's approach continues in a series of photographs by Polish-born and Warsaw-based artist Laura Pawela, entitled *Terrorismo Lesbico* (2009). The photographs document anti-patriarchal lesbian and feminist graffiti on the streets and walls of contemporary Buenos Aires. The homoerotic sensuality of Daučiková's video images also found a correspondence in a group of small oil paintings by Bulgarian-born and Paris-based artist Mirella Karadjova. The paintings entitled *Coming out... of the Closet* (2009), and *Pure Love* (2009) represent erotic domestic scenes involving two women, which could be located anywhere in the world, in a private sphere of female erotic fantasies.

### **The sexual/visual politics of Izabella Gustowska and Anna Daučiková new media art**

Art historians Piotr Piotrowski and Bojana Pejić argue, that the post-Communist societies of Central and Eastern Europe seem to be much more phallogentric, dominated by hetero-normative masculine culture, than the societies of so called former Western Europe (Pejić, 2009, 25-27; Piotrowski, 2009, 236-238). One reason for this difference can be found in the persistence of Soviet-era driven homophobia, but equally important, is the tradition of anti-Communist opposition from before 1989, which not only ignored the feminist movement, but was thoroughly masculine, removing female dissidents from the public eye. The male basis of the democratic political transformation was characteristic throughout former East Europe, and this may be one of the crucial traits of the new societies that emerged across the region. Politicians and the new intellectual elite were primarily responsible for social indifference to women's empowerment and equal gender and sexual status, as well as for challenging the politics of the job market and the economic and social inferiority of women and sexual minorities. The conservative political and intellectual elites of the 1990s rejected the gender and sexuality emancipation movement as a left discourse, which for many Eastern Europeans resembled too much the jargon of former Communist regimes.

Piotr Piotrowski points out that the patriarchal and nationalistic construction of the dominant gender system across the Central and Eastern

Europe coincides with the conflation of nationalism and masculinity. As soon as the new states emerged in the early 1990s, nationalism became an integral part of the new statehood, at the time much more so than democracy or the restitution of human rights. National and religious values were on the agenda of all political parties that were run predominantly by men. That is why for instance Polish feminists called the new system 'democracy with a male face'. In this conservative context, art practice has provided the most radical critique of unjust power and gender relations, established in the new democracies across the region. It was contemporary art discourse that touched upon themes that were made invisible, under the 'actual existing Socialism' and the new democracies, including issues such as domestic violence, deconstruction of the ideas of motherhood, the questions of queer identities and rights, and the criticism of masculine nationalism (Piotrowski, 2009, 236-238). Feminist art, especially, generated a significant impulse of gender and sexual revolt (Leszkowicz, 2005, 1-6). Gender-conscious video artists such as Izabella Gustowska and Anna Daučíková had a doubly precarious position, as 'feminists' located in the strongly Catholic-based traditions of Polish and Slovak cultures. Their projects are conspicuously intent on the feminisation and 'biographisation' of the traditionally masculine and analytical medium of video art, which in Eastern Europe was connected since the 1970s with an intellectual, disembodied conceptualism, largely dominated by men, as exemplified by the widely influential Film Form Workshop from the Film Academy in Łódź, active between years 1970 and 1977. But there was another story, especially prominent in Poland, involving proto-feminist new media and conceptual art in the 1970s. Isabella Gustowska started to use the film camera in the 1970s, and there were already other women artists active in the field.

In the 1970s, Natalia Lach-Lachowicz and Ewa Partum, the pioneers of Polish (pre)feminist art, worked with performance and film. Their media experimentation with the semiotics of film challenged and analyzed the sign system of television, including the manipulations of generic images of women. The Wrocław-based early feminist artist, Natalia LL (Lach-Lachowicz), was one of the most important representatives of the pioneering stage of new media art in Poland, in the late 1960s and the 1970s. She was a founding member of the Perfamo Gallery which opened in Wrocław in 1970, and was part of the neo avant-garde and countercultural art movement based on contextual and conceptual strategies (Krajewski, 2006, 13).

Natalia LL collaborated with her husband Andrzej Lachowicz, experimenting with photography and film, producing installations composed of serial images, and wrote a conceptual art theory. She specialized in the

critical media analysis of the erotic figuration of female bodies and sexuality, positioned in relation to mass culture, yet, her images had a strongly erotic quality themselves. The artist was fascinated by new technology in art, and sexuality as a personally and culturally liberating phenomenon. She was a pioneer of proto-feminist 'art pornography' located behind the Iron Curtain. The naked and eroticized attractive female body, her own and those of a variety of her models, were represented in her experimental photographs and films from the 1970s. Her erotically satirical work entitled *Consumption Art* (1972-1975), consists of several series of photos and a 16mm film showing young women eating bananas and other types of food, and comments on the eroticism of eating and consumption, including obvious references to sex and in particular oral sex. In the 1970, bananas were difficult to obtain in the Eastern Bloc, and were perceived at the time as luxurious and exotic fruits. Moreover, freedom of sexual expression and representation was highly restricted, while pornography was totally illegal, and hence, rendered absent. The erotic installations of Natalia LL were often censored. Thus, in her art she commented on erotic and consumerist desires and sexual fantasies. Her work was part of the heterosexual sexual revolution that was happening in the Polish cultural underground, where new media played an erotically stimulating role not only for many male artists with a camera but also for such women artists as Natalia LL. Her sensual short film entitled *Impressions* (1973) is a detailed and close-up study of the surface, shapes and movements of a naked female body located in a domestic setting. The work parallels explorations of the feminist artists of the 1970s such as Hannah Wilke, Carolee Schneemann and Sanja Iveković who were exploring the erotic qualities and joys of the female body on their own terms.

Ewa Partum was another important proto-feminist artist working in the 1970s in Poland, located between Warsaw and Łódź where she ran Adres Gallery. Partum was a performance and video artist, strongly engaged in conceptual, linguistic and feminist art. She was the first Polish woman artist to perform nude in a public space, making statements about being a female artist and drawing on her experiences of being a woman in her art production. She even announced that she would perform naked until female artists got equal rights in the field of art. Unlike the sexually playful Natalia LL, Ewa Partum has always represented her naked body in a more instrumental way, trying neither to abuse it nor use it for amusement (Szyłak, 2006, 2). Her gender politics in art was predominantly intellectual rather than sensory. Yet, she struggled with censorship because of her use of nudity. In her series of structural films entitled *Tautological*

*Cinema* (1973), Partum combined the analyses of the language of cinema and poetry with her performative enactment of sign language. Her own image is an important part of her experimental films in which she claimed “My touch is a touch of a woman”. In the 1970s she established conceptual feminist art practice in Poland as well as being referenced in the context of other pioneering international feminist artists and critics such as Valie Export and Lucy Lippard.

Early Polish feminist artists demonstrate that the emancipatory power of new media for women artists across the Central and Eastern European region started long before 1989. Yet, each country in the region has a different revision of art history in this regard. In Slovakia, proto-feminist artist Jana Želibská started working with video in the 1990s after the cultural and political changes that had occurred (Geržová, 2010, 313). Writing from the position of someone who was living in the former Czechoslovakia, Anna Daučíková mentioned that feminist theory didn’t exist in Socialist countries, not even among dissenting groups (Geržová, 2010, 316). This means that across the entire Eastern Block we can locate precursors of feminist art in the 1970s and in curating in the 1980s. The more theoretical elaborations on feminist art history and criticism started in the 1990s, after the transformation, parallel with developments of the social feminist movement across the region (Pachmanova 2010, 40-41).

In the 1980s, Anna Daučíková relocated to Moscow to live with her Russian girlfriend and returned to Slovakia in the early 1990s with a series of photographs entitled *Moscow/Women/Sunday* (1988-1990). Daučíková represented ordinary Russian women with shopping bags, on the streets of Moscow on Sundays. In these portraits, her intention was to commemorate a specific Soviet type of female identity before it disappears in a post-Soviet era dominated by progressive consumerism and new gender rules. One of her recent cycles of video films, *Portrait of a Woman with Institution* (2010), is devoted to the portraiture of individual women within the professional context across a variety of public institutions. Through video interviews, the women offer their own accounts of the experience of working in the institutions. In Daučíková’s videos, curator Monika Mitášová comments on the bridging of the Slovak National Gallery, an academic Hanna Hacker discusses the University of Vienna, and finally Anna Daučíková herself comments on the gender based oppressions of the Catholic Church.

In a video interview about her exhibition *Old Matters* showcased at SEDF in Bratislava in 2011, Anna Daučíková describes a series of photographs of her feet, *Untitled II* (1992):

“I realised that in my work I touch on the issue of obscenity... obscenity as something that occurs off stage. Something that is not on the scene, that doesn't belong to it. I've always been interested in what doesn't belong”.<sup>1</sup>

The artist hints here at the fact that the personal and political expression of a different sexual identity was definitely something put at the margins, located off stage for a very long time across the region. In an interview for the magazine *Profil* in 2000, the critic Hana Vaškovičová asked Daučíková a question about the gender focus and feminism in her work. The artist pointed out:

“I am interested in casting doubts on gender stereotypes, or on white spots in issues of gender and sexual identity. First, I was searching for these things intuitively, seeing them as an issue of homogeneity and heterogeneity. Later, I got influenced by feminist theory. I found out about it only after 1989. First, I got in touch with Italian feminist thinking that is based on French feminist thinking and probably the most ‘feminine’ one. Later, I started working for *Aspekt* and came across texts that I could agree with much more. Politically, I could approximately describe it as lesbian feminism. The author closest to me is probably Monique Wittig. At the same time, when I came across lesbian theory, I also came to new media and video. I started with those ‘manipulations’ very spontaneously in 1996, while researching corporeality” (Daučíková in Geržová, 2011, 316- 317).

Declaring her engaged political position during the *Gender Check* symposium in Vienna in November 2009, Anna Daučíková, noted that homophobia has become more persistent today than in the 1990s. She referred to the fact that in several Central and Eastern European countries, gay pride events are either officially forbidden or subject to physical attacks by right wing groups. She also emphasised her own political position in art, in contrast to many queer artists who want to escape into the personal realm from the activist LGBTQ agenda (Pejić, 2010, 28).

By contrast, Isabella Gustowska does not identify herself as a lesbian, or an openly political artist, and her new media art has always been based on female portraiture, including self-portraiture. Her artistic attitude is closely linked with the contemporary theoretical queer position, embracing the plurality of female sexualities with more fluidity. Her engaged art politics are testified by a long-standing and consistent artistic and curatorial preoccupation with the promotion of art created by women artists.

---

<sup>1</sup> See video interview with the artist <http://artycok.tv/lang/en-us/7388/old-matters>

Gustowska argues that women are more complex than men. Her fascination with womanhood is tied not only with her own artistic activity but also with bold curatorial projects. In her curatorial work, she authored unprecedented and pioneering exhibitions and conferences devoted to women's art in Poland, including *The Art of Women* (1980), *Meetings – Presence I* (1987), *Meetings – Presence III* (1992), *Presence IV – 6 Women* (1994). These exhibitions and events were organised under the aegis of ON Gallery, associated with the Fine Art Academy in Poznań, where the artist was teaching. To stage these shows, Gustowska collaborated with a variety of independent and public galleries and museums in Poznań, including ON Gallery, Kont Gallery, the Ethnographic Museum and the Public Art Gallery Arsenal. These shows were spread across several art spaces across Poznań and her pioneering exhibitions were very well attended and broadly discussed.

Gustowska's iconography of femininity is connected with the notions of a dream, fluidity, moisture, and intimacy. Figures of femininity, including the artist's own self-portraits, and portraits of other women, form the first foundation subject matter from which stem the emergent themes and cycles. Based on photographs, an extended cycle, *Relative Similarities* (1979–1990), a study of the female portrait and nude, she explores the relationship between two women. The artist stressed her interest in the idea of 'twin-ness' - unity in duality, or a duality in unity. The cycle is composed of over fifty life-size figures, the artist's self-portraits and portraits of her imaginary twin sisters. It is made up of relief-like images based on photographs, in a mixed media technique, on the borderline of painting, object, and sculpture. The plane of representation becomes more prominent, soft like a cushion, jutting into the viewers' field of vision and provoking them to examine the intriguing surface. The figurations of melancholy are both optical and haptic. The photographic prints and objects touch upon the problem of an intimate relation of two women, their physical proximity, fascination and closeness.

Gustowska creates a vision of female homo-sociality, a counter-narration to the male homo-social network on which patriarchy is based; male clans and networks that perpetuate the system of masculine domination. Landscapes of feminine proximity are an alternative but also have their inherent unconscious in contrast to masculinity constructed as a patriarchal consciousness. It is towards such images of femininity that Gustowska explored in her pivotal cycles of video installations *Dreams* (1990–1994) and *Floating* (1994–1997). Her 'virtual women' are portraits of 'flesh-and-blood' women, represented in a dream-like submarine world, submerged in water. Monitors hidden in the metallic sculpted forms,



screen green tinted video films, showing women in another world; submarine, cosmic, prenatal.

Video installations combining women and water sources appear to be Gustowska's search for some sort of a feminine *sacrum*. In the work, *Source Women* (1995-1996), she constructed steel forms into which were built photosensitive canvases on stretchers, representing women's faces, from their mouths flows water. Under these forms are located monitors with video films showing water cascading down waterfalls. In these extended video installations, we enter a different linguistic, or rather pre-linguistic sphere, where conventional language gives way to all sorts of vocalisations and musical sounds. For this pre-linguistic sphere, Izabella Gustowska found her own metaphor, that of a whisper. The video installation *In a Whisper* (1999) is a composition of seven transparent and seven metal geometrical forms with small monitors placed inside. These monitors project video films of close-ups of female lips, accompanied by a soundtrack of a whisper. This verbal message is additionally enhanced by the rhythmic sound resembling a mantra or a kind of music box noise, created by means of electronic sound editing.

In Gustowska's artistic career that spans more than forty years, she has experimented with photography, printmaking, sculpture, installation, and most prominently with video. In video art, which she has worked with since 1985, her projects are situated at the threshold of sculpture and video in the form of installations. In these, we experience a multiplication and transformation of monitors in which video films are screened. The monitors hidden in special objects surround the audience and create an ambient environment. Finally, she made a transition from a monitor to a multimedia projector, from video installation to a video projection. Explaining her use of video technology, she commented that people have grown accustomed to the media image, which has become a part of their intimate everyday life, and therefore, it is through technology that she speaks about that intimate life (Kępińska, 1996, 19).

In her video installation *L'Amour Passion* (2000-2001), she immerses the audience into the depth of affection, into the erotic touch, into the chasm of love and passion (Figure 7.4 and Centrefold). The artist saturates the virtual world with emotions, transforming electronic impulses into amorous caresses. Her *Passions and Other Cases* (2001) exhibition at the Centre of Contemporary Art in Warsaw featured the first version of *L'Amour Passion*. Three machines were situated in a dim interior, standing in a green glow that lightened gigantic closing and opening steel and Plexiglas constructions in the shape of a shell (Figure 7.5), with projections inside each object. One of the shell-like objects projects the



Figure 7.4 and Figure 7.5 Izabella Gustowska, *L'Amour Passion*, 2000-2001.  
Video installation. Courtesy of the artist.

faces of two women about to kiss one another, the image disappears into the dark interior; the second one shows two men; the third one a woman and a man. Another version of this video installation is composed of three oval light-boxes representing three couples; gay, lesbian and straight as still portraits, while the three monitors located below the objects show films that narrate their intimate touches and kisses. Writing metaphorically, this is a world of the senses, a world of a dream, and at the same time, the space of a virtual net. The bodies seem to glisten with particles of pixels. Atom by atom, the molecular stream transports us into the reality of our dreams about love, and at the same time, into the future of the body and poly-sexual society. Intimacy is transformed here, into a policy of equality and the plural psychic space becomes a stage of art and love. *L'Amour Passion* project shows best how the artist, by displaying love histories, humanizes the new technology of an image and how by means of video art she comments on the possibility of an intimate democracy at both the micro and macro levels.

### **Concluding comments: New media and intimate democracy**

Gustowska's and Daučiková's video works immerse the viewer into an alternative realm of femininity that seems to be suppressed under the masculine visual and political surface. The artists' use of new media has played a role in the transition to a more democratic cultural landscape across the Central and Eastern European region. Through enhanced personal subjectivity and sensuality of video, Gustowska and Daučiková have created a new social and psychic space that I refer to as an 'intimate democracy'. The ideal of the intimate democracy is a concept that stands behind my own curatorial work.

The intimate democracy can be understood as a model of democracy that begins on the psychosomatic level of subjectivity. The politics of democracy cannot be considered solely on the collective level, the discovery and affirmation of the complexity of psychic, erotic, corporeal life, that is, the multiplicity of the self, works against individual and collective fundamentalisms and exclusions. It is necessary to start with the elemental factors that constitute the plural subject, among them eroticism and love. Gustowska's and Daučiková's videos in the first decade of post-Communist transformation opened up non-heteronormative, non-masculine spaces of intimacy in a very hetero-normative and patriarchal culture.

A video camera in their art positions reality in the midst of personal life. In this way, the camera appears to counteract the distancing and alienating effects of visual technologies. By means of the 'mass media' tool, the artists seem capable of conveying aspects of intimate subjectivity. The introspection of the psyche and the body portrayed by video affirms the complexity of the subject. Their intrusion into the visual system subverts it. The political use of the unconscious exploration is tied to immersion into the female psyche conceptualised as the uncanny otherness located in the patriarchal culture of the rational. Unconscious exploration is also linked with the enhancement of the senses and sensuality through the projected pulsating visual surface. This is the queer visibility of transitions, condensations, rhythm, motion, spatiality, embodiment and fragmentation. Access to the archaic foundation of an image opens up a place where the image seems to float, wave, pulsate, dissolve, flicker, resound, and reflect the conditioning of the self. These strategies of deformation, dispersal, and sensualisation of the visual can indeed be found in Gustowska's and Daučíková's video installations.

Through the use of the technology of the moving image, the artists embarked on a transformative project, at the time when across the Central and Eastern Europe and more specifically in Polish and Slovak popular culture of music videos, films, television and advertisement, are still in large, imprisoned in traditional gender and sexual visualisations. Their art, though from the margins, contributes to the creation of an alternative visual culture, challenging and changing the narrow and restrictive perspective of the official media on sexual politics. With an open and deepened vision of gender and sexuality projected in the examples discussed here, new media feminist art can be translated into the plural subjectivity of the intimate democracy.

As a curator, I work on the project of creating gender and sexual equality and democracy through the visual means. I have found that collaborations with queer feminist new media artists have been essential to this endeavour. Through the use of video, the artists such as Gustowska and Daučíková have presented subversive strategies with both a sexual and political dimension. First of all, they visualise a diversity of love stories in opposition to the exclusively hetero-normative construction of gender and sexuality in the public domain across Central Eastern Europe in the 1990s. This was the decade when the new countries across the Central and Eastern European region started to grapple with the democratic project of gender and sexual equality. Secondly, the artists also reinvented and explored the genre of the female nude and the female portrait, imbued it with feminist and queer positions, and thus, redefined

the patriarchal images of femininity so pervasive in visual conventions. The familiarity and importance of the moving image for the general audience, was used by such artists to go beyond and contest the norms of heterosexist popular culture, both under Communism and in newly constituted post-Communist states across the region.

Moreover, the language of video was essential for communicating with a younger generation of viewers and artists, who grew up with the technology of the VCR and newly introduced commercial music channels like MTV. At the same time, this new video technology was associated with an attractive oppositional culture. Since the 1980s, new technology introduced possibilities of viewing the moving image that was no longer controlled or censored by the state. Thus in the 1980s, video was perceived as an alternative medium to the official Socialist state television discourse, and in the 1990s in particular, the use of video became a critical counterbalance to the new systems of power.

In both decades of political transformation across the Central and Eastern European region, video functioned not only as a new form of entertainment, but also as an alternative political tool, introducing new vistas of visibility. New media allowed artists and activists to elucidate subjects that were suppressed both under state Socialism and in the new democracies based on an exclusively heterosexual male construction (Kitliński, 2009). The feminist queer artists worked against the early ‘pornographication’ of commercial video, creating with their cameras visions of alternative embodiments and erotica. It was a project of feminist intervention into the male pornographic representations of womanhood, which became widely distributed through the video industry after the collapse of Communism.

A further example of this oppositional agenda in video art is the fact that from its inception in 1993, the strategic cultural policy of the Open Society Institute founded by George Soros was aimed to promote new media and the performative arts. Hence, video and new media art were instrumental in creating socially engaged culture, investigating difficult questions on new democracies in the new Europe. Many video art workshops and programs were set up all over the region to enable diversity, independence, and freedom of expression, connecting art with human rights. Such initiatives allowed some artists to distance themselves from the national agenda and state controlled institutions at a time of increased post-Communist nationalism, censorship and religious fundamentalism.

To conclude, the growing reputation of feminist and queer video art diversifies the dominant Central and Eastern European art history canon of the late 20th century that continues to be based mainly on painting. It is

the genre of painting with its predominantly conventional iconography of womanhood that has been challenged by new forms of moving images. Artists such as Gustowska and Daučíková have contributed to a new postmodern tradition of subjectivity construction that is corporeal, erotic, autobiographical and queer feminist, and at the same time, socially transformative. These artists have developed a unique idiom of representation which introduced new forms of identity and figuration, and have also facilitated the development of a more contemporary democratic visual gender consciousness across the CEE region and beyond.

### Bibliography

- Butler, Cornelia and Mark, Lisa Gabrielle. *WACK!: Art and the Feminist Revolution*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press. 2007.
- Cooper, Emmanuel. *The Sexual Perspective Homosexuality and Art in the Last 100 Years in the West*. London and New York: Routledge. 1998.
- Ewa Partum 1965-2001*, Angelika Stepken (Ed), Exhibition catalogue, Badischer Kunstverein, Karlsruhe/National Museum, Warsaw. 2001.
- Faderman, Lilliana. *Surpassing the Love of Men Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present*, New York: Harper. 1998.
- Geržová, Jana. 'Art and the Question of Gender in Slovak Art', In Bojana Pejić (Ed) *Gender Check: A Reader. Art and Theory in Eastern Europe* Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther Konig. 2010. 309-319.
- Gržinić, Marina. *Situated Contemporary Art Practices. Art, Theory and Activism from (the East of) Europe*, Ljubljana and Frankfurt am Main: Revolver. 2004.
- Holt, Ed and Pizarova, Martina. 'Gay Movements Fight For a Place in Society', 2002. Accessed 19 March 2012  
<http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=90654>.
- Hornowska Ewa (Ed) *Izabella Gustowska. Life is a Story*, Poznań: The National Museum. 2007.
- Irigaray, Luce. *Speculum of the Other Woman* Trans Gillian C. Gill. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. 1985.
- Izabella Gustowska. Namiętności i inne przypadki [Passions and Other Cases]*, Warsaw: Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej Zamek Ujazdowski. 2001.
- Jay, Martina. *Downcast Eyes The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, Berkeley: University of California Press. 1994.

- Kępińska, Alicja. 'Izabella Gustowska'. In *Izabella Gustowska. Płynąc* Warsaw: Galeria Sztuki Współczesnej Zachęta. 1996.
- Kitliński, Tomasz. *A New Dissident Civil Society: Hot Art as Activism against Poland's Moral Majority*, 2009. Accessed May 2012. <http://www.csf.ceetrust.org/paper/5/>
- Krajewski, Piotr. 'Building Blocks of the History of Media Art in Poland', *Polish Video Art*. Poznań: Museum Inner Spaces, 2006.
- Leszkowicz, Paweł. *Ars Homo Erotica*, Exhibition catalogue the National Museum. Warsaw: CePeD. 2010.
- Leszkowicz, Paweł. 'Feminist Revolt: Censorship of Women's Art in Poland', *Bad Subject*, 2005. Accessed 19 March 2012 <http://bad.eserver.org/reviews/2005/leszkowicz.html>.
- Norton, Rick. *The Myth of the Modern Homosexual: Queer History and the Search for Cultural Unity*. London: Cassell. 1998.
- Norton, Rick. 'The Sodomite and the Lesbian'. Accessed 19 March 2012 <http://rictornorton.co.uk/social22.htm>.
- Pachmanova, Martina. 'In? Out? In Between? Some Notes on the Invisibility of a Nascent Eastern European Feminist and Gender Discourse in Contemporary Art Theory', In Bojana Pejić (Ed) *Gender Check: A Reader. Art and Theory in Eastern Europe* Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther Konig. 2010. 37-49.
- Pejić, Bojana. 'Proletarians of All Countries, Who Washes Your Socks? Equality, Dominance and Differences in Eastern European Art', In Bojana Pejić (Ed) *Gender Check Femininity and Masculinity in the Art of Eastern Europe: A Catalogue*, Exhibition catalogue MUMOK Vienna. Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther Konig. 2009. 19-32.
- Pejić, Bojana. Eppur si muove!, *Gender Check: A Reader. Art and Theory in Eastern Europe* in *Gender Check: A Reader. Art and Theory in Eastern Europe*, Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther Konig. 2010, 13-37.
- Penn, Shana. *Solidarity's Secret: The Women Who Defeated Communism in Poland*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. 2006.
- Piotrowski, Piotr. 'Gender after the Wall' In Bojana Pejić (Ed) *Gender Check Femininity and Masculinity in the Art of Eastern Europe: A Catalogue*, Exhibition catalogue MUMOK Vienna. Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther Konig. 2009. 236-241.
- Piotrowski, Piotr. *In the Shadow of Yalta. Art and the Avant Garde in Eastern Europe 1945-1989* London: Reaktion Books. 2009.
- Polska sztuka wideo [Polish Video Art]*. Catalogue Poznań: Museum Inner Spaces. 2006.

- Rusinová, Zora. 'Discourse of the Self: Self-Portrait in the Milieu of Gender Visuals'. In Bojana Pejić (Ed) *Gender Check. Femininity and Masculinity in the Art of Eastern Europe: A Catalogue*, Exhibition catalogue MUMOK Vienna. Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther Konig. 2009. 125-132.
- Saslow, James. *Pictures and Passions. A History of Homosexuality in the Visual Arts* New York: Viking. 1999.
- Simons, Patricia. 'Lesbian (In) Visibility in Italian Renaissance Culture: Diana and Other Cases of *Donna con Donna*', In Whitney Davis (Ed) *Gay and Lesbian Studies in Art History*, Philadelphia: Haworth Press. 1994. 81-123.
- Szyłak, Aneta. 'The Legality of Space', *Ewa Partum. The Legality of Space*, Gdańsk: Wyspa Institute of Art. 2006.
- Vanita, Ruth. *Sappho and the Virgin Mary Same-Sex Love and the English Literary Imagination* New York: Columbia University Press. 1996.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

# GENDER OFF THE AGENDA? CURATING NEW MEDIA ART: *CROSSING OVER* AND *DESKTOP ICONS*

ILİYANA NEDKOVA

### Introduction

If the gender debate is about challenging traditional sex role attributions, and in visual culture, about interrogating socially determined images of women and men, this chapter asks how this debate fared in relation to the production strategies by contemporary artists and curators from Central and Eastern Europe. I have set out to explore this issue through a process of critical reflection on my own overlapping East and West-based curatorial identities, shaped by the diverse geographies of post-Cold War Europe. Additionally, I have scrutinised my curatorial practice largely concerned with the process of reconciling the relationships between contemporary art and new media art. The chapter explores the specific connection between the entities of contemporary art and new media art. Reflecting on my curatorial practice experience, originating in Eastern Europe and expanding Westwards out of the region, I will discuss the processes associated with initiating, developing, producing, exhibiting and touring two international projects, entitled *Crossing Over* (1996-2003) and *Desktop Icons* (2001-2003), as well as reflect upon their legacy.

From the vantage point of entry and marking gender history with the *Crossing Over* project, through the hindsight of the wide international outreach of the *Desktop Icons* curated programme, this chapter acts, in my view, as a much-needed pause and an introspective moment to assess the achievements and challenges of such curatorial undertakings. Both projects have involved working with artists' film and video in an attempt to test out the potentials and limitations of the genre. The investigation aims to enrich the current curatorial discourse through professional-

‘confessional’ analysis of issues such as gender awareness, curatorial premise, theme-led practice, co-curatorship, curatorial commission and the stages of curating, including pre-production, production and post-production of the arts situated in the geographies of Central and Eastern Europe and its discourse. Throughout, I intend to engage in a self-critical reflection associated with various curatorial strategies for working within the context of the white cube, the black box as well as in public gallery spaces that could be described as neither a white cube nor a black box, such as specially converted micro-cinemas.

The aim is to highlight those of the commissioned and featured works from the selected projects that explore the problematic of gender deconstruction in order to demonstrate the process of blurring the relationships between new media and contemporary art production. Included in the discussion are works by artists such as Phil Collins (born in 1970 in Runcorn, lives in Cologne and Berlin), Boryana Rossa (born in 1969 in Sofia and lives in Bulgaria and the USA), Kai Kaljo (born in 1959 in Tallinn where she lives and works), Matthias Müller (born in 1961 in Bielfield where he lives and works), Ivan Moudov (Born in 1975 in Sofia where he lives and works), Stefan Nikolaev (born in 1968 in Sofia, lives in Paris and Sofia), Lala Raščić (born in 1977 in Sarajevo, lives in Zagreb, Sarajevo and New Orleans), and Mare Tralla (born in 1967 in Tallinn, lives in London). With geo-cultural and gender borders still shifting, the question is what does it mean to be European, to create and to curate in the spaces between East and West of Europe? The inference is that works of art are inherently malleable and flexible. Depending on the curatorial intention, works could change their ‘tag’ in accordance with the exhibiting contexts and regardless of the medium. I conclude with my reflections that new media curators and their institutions should seek closer integration within the broader contemporary art system and institutional context.

### **Curatorial pre-production: Theme-led approach**

The curatorial premise for establishing the *Crossing Over* project in 1995 as a six year, annual initiative for developing, producing, exhibiting and touring short artists’ films and videos was marked by both formal and thematic transitions. These included to-ing and fro-ing the conceptual spaces between so called new and old Europe; crossing over between analogue and digital technologies, traditional and emergent art disciplines, gender awareness and indifference, and ultimately, between the worlds of new media and contemporary art. According to Kapur (2003, 2) the introduction of the thematic threads “gave a strong and coherent framework

to the programme". In her critical appraisal of *Crossing Over*, Kapur (2003) defined the project as "unique in the scope of its vision, the process of creation and the nomadic nature of its operation" (p. 3).

In contrast, the curatorial premise for the *Desktop Icons* project was to juxtapose Scottish and international artists in a touring program of pre-existing short artists' films and videos, which collectively and conceptually set the trends for digital desktop film-making. The program's theme was a meeting point between popular culture, art, design and new technologies. One of the curatorial outcomes was to explore the emergent new desktop iconography and reflect on this term through a series of curatorial and artists' talks at 26 touring venues that included several international cities, spanning from Belgrade to Bogota. It culminated with a curatorial essay published in the *Desktop Icons* booklet (Nedkova, 2002a, 3-8). In her review of *Desktop Icons*, Liz Brown (2003) reasserted the value of such a curatorial approach:

"The computer-based possibilities of filmmaking have been leapt upon by people working in a wide variety of creative disciplines, including artists, designers and animators, and the Edinburgh-based organisation New Media Scotland decided to do its bit to help these mini masterpieces find the widest possible audience." (Brown, 2003, 1)

Post-Cold War political realities were addressed in both the curatorial choice of the themes for the *Crossing Over* project and its touring destinations. The content of the newly commissioned artists' works was marked by a paradigm of economic and political transition; the Cold War opposition reformulated for the 1990s and the early 2000s. However, sweeping categories such as East and West, new Europe and old Europe, nationality and identity, sex and gender were not conceived by the co-curators and artists at the time as shut-down, sealed-off entities. These entities have been purged of the myriad currents and countercurrents that animated human history which not only recorded religious wars and imperial conquests but also allowed exchange, cross-fertilization and sharing, as argued by Edward Said (2001) in his poignant article *The Clash of Ignorance*, a critique of Samuel Huntington's (1996) book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*.

As the origin of the *Crossing Over* project dates back to 1994 or shortly after the fall of Eastern European versions of Communism, it coincided with the time when euphoria spread across the region, resulting in uncertainty and confusion. In a curatorial essay *A New Generations of Europeans*, I have emphasized the ethos of subtlety and personal experiences which largely informed the entire *Crossing Over* project:

“In 1989, as a 21-year old student in Humanities I stumbled into Bulgaria’s quiet revolution, one in a succession of European upheavals which started delineating a new, seemingly undivided world. Within a few years, many of us who rode the first wave of revolutionary euphoria were cultivating the desperate optimism and cultural pragmatism of first time explorers. Enabled to travel without the ideological constraints of the recent past, we wanted to see for ourselves what happened to the post-Cold War dream of transition to democracy and the mounting irrelevance of the Eastern and Western Blocs.” (Nedkova, 2003, 2)

The wave of enthusiasm for socio-economic changes as well as globalization and cultural mixing or hybridity that since 1989 swept the art world was soon lost in the act of translation, or as critiqued by Julian Stallabrass (2004, 13-14), it often appeared vague and merely rhetorical.

Having identified the need for ‘a framework enabling new East Europeans to tell their own video stories and bounce their ideas off fellow video artists from old Europe’, I took it as my curatorial responsibility to ensure the high quality of filmmaking, editing and exhibiting (Nedkova 2003, 2). Invariably, the artists commissioned to develop and produce works within *Crossing Over* interpreted the project’s overarching themes in idiosyncratic ways in approaching the subject matter, ranging from more literal to fairly oblique interpretations. Although the work manifested itself in different ways, ‘the journey’ emerged as a common thread in the project, illustrating a change or a transition. Another common thread that emerged was associated with artists’ gender awareness - the use of the body as a metaphor for addressing larger social and political issues.

The *Desktop Icons* project represents a different approach to theme-led curatorial practice. The curatorial brief was initiated by artist-curator Chris Byrne, who gave the project its title. In turn, Byrne performed a tribute to the Moscow-based net.art pioneer Alexei Shulgin who in 1997 curated the *Desktop Is* project – an international web-based exhibition that prompted reconsideration of the visual importance of the desktop interface. A few years later, when I was commissioned to take these initial ideas forward, I have found that the desktop is:

“[s]till a confused zone of ownership and identification, a space that resists commodification and welcomes metaphoric language. Today, most computer users and net.artists would still claim that the desktop is the main, perhaps the most popular element of the human-machine interface or their window to the digital world. For some the desktop is replacing the TV as the number one cultural epidemic.” (Nedkova, 2002a, 3)

My curatorial investigation of desktop culture was coupled with researching the iconography or the screen icons, in particular. This led to references borrowed from film, television and popular infotainment such as the video game *The Tomb Raider*. I speculated that the new screen icons are offered 15 Megabytes of fame as opposed to 15 minutes of fame, the 'coinage' attributed to Andy Warhol, implying the fleeting condition of a minor celebrity status, generated by the mass media for consumers with a limited attention span. Seduced and manipulated by new communication technologies, we are all promised a quick glimpse if not a megabyte slice of the possibilities within the unfolding digital world.

### **Curatorial production: Co-curatorship and authorship**

The curatorial production of *Crossing Over* was enveloped in a co-curatorial strategy with Nina Czegledy, an agent provocateur of East-West cultural productions, based between Canada and Europe. This resulted in a long-term agreement for years of *Crossing Over* co-curatorial enterprise, fuelled by a rewarding friendship. It is this under-explored gender-based relationship between collaboration and friendship that I argue can contribute to curatorial inadequacy in the art world. Extended friendship often appears as the unrecognized driving engine of curating. Building or exploiting one's friendships can turn into a critical success factor even for a minor cultural event. In discussing the notion of the curator/artist collaboration and the challenges of cross-cultural art projects, Graham (2002) concludes that a very good network of friends is essential in the art world (p.2). Graham (2002) further refers to artists who have successfully collaborated together despite the 'single hero' mindset of some art museums. Mentioned are a few groups such as KIT and BIT, or partnerships such as Thomson & Craighead, or Nina Pope and Karen Guthrie.

However, it is debatable whether such a collaborative curatorial strategy, which possibly verges on the networks or more precisely friendships, differs fundamentally when practiced by new media art curators or by their peers, working with more traditional art forms and in already well-networked institutions. According to a museum anthropologist and researcher Jonathan Zilberg (2006), there is no fundamental difference between these two modes of curating:

"All curators have to describe, classify and re-contextualize artistic objects (and processes) whether they are material or immaterial. All curators remain managers of symbolic information." (Zilberg, 2006, 3)

Zilberg (2006) further asserts that all curators use their judgment, making informed though ultimately subjective decisions, as to what constitutes the ‘best work’, pointing to the paradox that they ‘are damned if they do and damned if they don’t’ (p 3). He also negates the argument advanced by most of the contributors to the book *Curating Immateriality* (Krysa, 2006) that curators should be replaced by filter feeding protocols and democratically managed machines. It is the premise of the current thesis as a reflection of the *Crossing Over* project. He points out:

“someone is going to have to make the unpleasant decision as to what is ‘good’ and who is in and what is ‘bad’ and who is out - unless the new digital democrats throw out the filter.” (Zilberg, 2006, 3)

Another aspect of the curatorial production and co-curatorship, in particular, is the phenomenon of the invited independent curator. The invitation to curate the *Desktop Icons* project emerged from a curator Chris Byrne and the public institution he was the Founding Director of at the time, the Edinburgh-based New Media Scotland, the national agency for commissioning and exhibiting new media art works by Scottish and international artists. The invitation was prompted during the last iteration of *Crossing Over* artists’ residency and public program based in Liverpool where Byrne was invited as one of the presenters. Offers to undertake curatorial commissions by invitation are seen today as a facet of contemporary curatorial practice, albeit rarely featuring in curatorial discourse and theory. The process of commissioning a curator is briefly discussed by George Clark (2008) in the *Curatorial Resource for Artists’ Moving Image* or outsourcing work to independent curators when organizing festivals or exhibitions in which the lead curator or host institution may not be able to curate in-house for various reasons; perhaps a highly relevant scenario for my *Desktop Icons* curatorial commission.

I was approached as a guest curator with a brief or an idea to explore and develop a particular program in a dialogue with the institution-based curator, rather than independently. Not unlike the public commissioning process for artists, the curatorial commission most often comes with a raft of opportunities, challenges and limitations. *Desktop Icons* came with an agreed time frame and scale for the exhibition, as well as a framing of the type of works I was supposed to look for and to present. These included the agreed production budget, curatorial fee, a title and a pre-determined loose theme, a curatorial essay commission, as well as a targeted art form and a touring exhibition format. On reflection, one could argue that in this instance the relationship with the independent curator was quite directly guided. The invitation to develop the *Desktop Icons* program was based on

both my own area of curatorial specialism and interest as well as on further research into the area, new to my curatorial practice, yet, relevant to the pre-existing project. Indeed, the most recent history of contemporary curating, from the late 1980s onwards, seems to be largely intertwined with the rise of the role of the invited curator and the proliferation of the mega international exhibitions, including annuals, biennials, triennials etc., as well as staging these events at more remote locations and cities, such as Ljubljana or Liverpool. One can argue that a new culture of curating is settling in where it is not the artist but the 'guest curator' who is at the centre of attention, largely supported by a local socio-economic network. In fact, the *Desktop Icons* initial curatorial commission led to my curatorial residency and associate curatorship with New Media Scotland in the years 2001 and 2004.

### **Critical reflection on curatorial constituents: *Crossing Over* and *Desktop Icons***

Reminiscing over the mechanism for delivering each segment of *Crossing Over* also means rethinking the 'curatorial recipe' which included in equal measures various ingredients as part of the three curatorial stages of pre-production, production and post-production. These stages included e-mail communication between the co-curators often working from across continents, the open calls to artists for submission of proposals, the annual selection of the new line up of international artists, the film production and residential workshops with nomadic outposts in Sofia in 1996 and 1997, Novi Sad in 1998, Ljubljana in 1999, Columbus in 2000, and Liverpool in 2001. These residencies offered temporary media laboratories for experimenting with narratives and technologies and were hosted by a mix of the institutions including the art schools, the cultural centres, the media art organizations and the contemporary art galleries. It was another example of the crossover of the two worlds; that of new media and that of contemporary art.

At the core of the curatorial production and post-production was a two-week editing rhythm, punctuated by 'micro-festival' activities, thus, contributing to the cultural ecology of each host city. Each year the festival showcased a new crop of *Crossing Over* shorts alongside various artists' films and videos as well as public talks featuring the resident artists, local and visiting intellectuals. The *Crossing Over* shorts were then shown at mixed destinations, ranging from *Documenta X* in Kassel in 1997 to Liverpool's *Video Positive* in 2001. Part of the public-facing curatorial strategy included staging the annual launch event of each

selection of the newly commissioned and produced artists' films and videos at the established venues, including Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana in 1999 and Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, Ohio, USA in 2000. It also targeted the classic black box venues including Liverpool's Unity Theatre in 2001 and Edinburgh's Filmhouse. The latter was the *Crossing Over Time* world premiere screening within the 57<sup>th</sup> Edinburgh International Film Festival in 2003. It was curated in tune with the festival's strands of 'New Europe' and 'Black Box' providing the festival goers with an opportunity to engage with the co-curators in a pre-screening and during an intermission discussion. On reflection, the lasting legacy of the *Crossing Over* project lies in the cracks between the curatorial formula - connecting people who wouldn't otherwise have met; raising the artists' own gender awareness; allowing for more personal interaction and more spontaneous artistic alliances which continue online and in real life well beyond the initial residency; nurturing a new generation of European artists, toiling away in relative anonymity to produce new works.

*Desktop Icons*' curatorial pre-production benefited from an initial research and development stage, aiming to explore how the pre-existing theme would turn into an exhibition project through solidifying the idea and expanding on the succinct title. These were carried out through a series of face-to-face and e-mail discussions, instigating a productive co-curatorial relationship. The initial research is defined by Clark (2008) as "a key to progressing with a project and defining the area and work you are interested in as well as the format your project might take" (p.4). In the case of *Desktop Icons* this involved 'hunting' for the most recent and relevant artworks through a series of curatorial research routes: curatorial studio visits and viewings of works by Scottish-based artists; viewings of works by international artists in collections available online such as Electronic Arts Intermix, New York, or requesting of identified works to be submitted for a preview; 'cultural shopping' at the mega exhibitions and festivals, such as Venice Biennale, European Media Arts Festival, Osnabruck and Edinburgh International Film Festival, all held in 2001. The shortlist grew and the sub-themes started to emerge as 'organic' trends from viewing the works with the specific concept and agenda in mind. One of the unexpected outcomes was the wealth of material, which resulted in two programs of 80 min each, as opposed to the originally planned single program of the same length. This expanded program necessitated further research, identification and pursuit of a new funding partner. It was my curatorial ambition and 'going this extra mile' for initiating and succeeding with additional fund-raising. It was through a



successful application to the Art Council of England that the initial funding provided by the Scottish Arts Council was supplemented.

While building and managing these initial relationships with the funders and production stage contacts, negotiations were under way with a number of other key organisations and individuals, including places to launch and tour the exhibition (ranging from cinemas and galleries to museums both nationally and outside of the UK); the source and availability of the featured works (ranging from distributors and collections to representing galleries and artists, themselves) and finally the partners who would have made it possible to show the work (including collaborators, cultural institutions and funders). On reflection, the clear proposal for *Desktop Icons* has proven a crucial tool for communicating precisely my curatorial plans and aspirations to all the parties involved, as clearly identified by Clark (2008) in his recommendations. It should be noted that this research stage was preceded by the decision on behalf of the host organization to outsource the curatorial work to an independent writer and curator. The curator becomes simultaneously a fundraiser, PR agent and exhibition tour operator. It was in consultation with the host that my curatorial role was further extended to briefing and working with the graphic designers to the final release of the *Desktop Icons* booklet and a series of flyers.

In fact, one could argue that the stages of writing and defining are also directly related to the production of an exhibition as they allow for a fuller understanding and contextualization of the selected works, as Mark Prince (2004) states:

“At best contemporary art galleries [or any public exhibiting institutions and the curators as their agents by proxy] are more than the sum of their parts; they provide coherent cultures which strengthen the position of each artist. [...] Above all the function of the gallery and the responsibility of the curator as a controlled environment in which to breed credibility, and consequently market value depend on the skilful promotion of context.” (Prince, 2004, 18)

We could infer that works of art are inherently malleable and flexible; depending on the curatorial intention and political power these works could change their ‘tag’ in accordance with the exhibiting contexts, whether it is new media art-related or contemporary art.

The post-production stage of *Desktop Icons* included the preparation of the relevant publicity, press and marketing material in advance of the launch or touring event in order to achieve their effective distribution – another indication of the redundant distinction between the two curatorial

practices of new media art and contemporary art. More specifically to the context of showing and touring artists' films and videos, it has been my curatorial task to run relevant technical tests to ensure the projection would be correct and sound levels right. Compiling documentation and e-newsletters with relevant updates on the touring, including opportunities for artists' talks issued on a monthly basis to all the participating artists or representing parties have also been an essential part of the curatorial post-production cycle. The original master copies used for putting together the program into the two exhibition formats BETACAM SP and DVD were also returned promptly to the exhibiting artists. Permissions to extend the tour to another year, due to popular demand, beyond the agreed terms in the individual *Desktop Icons* contracts were also sought promptly from each of the artists and or their representatives.

### **Curatorial positioning and forms of relationships: *Crossing Over* commissions**

The facts and figures of the 6 annual *Crossing Overs* reveal the involvement of 59 artists from 18 different countries who produced 47 short artists' films and videos premiered in 5 world cities. The *Crossing Over* catalogue (Nedkova and Troy, 2001) was the first print publication presenting a milestone and celebrating the first five manifestations of the project. This was further extended by a print catalogue, the *Crossing Over Time* booklet, contextualizing and complementing the international tour of 23 selected works transferred on DVD (Byrne, 2003). The following works which featured in the project all demonstrate the blurring of the relationship between new media and contemporary art.

#### **Boryana Rossa *Celebrating the Next Twinkling* (1999)**

*Celebrating the Next Twinkling* (1999), 2 min 45 sec video is dominated by the image of two screaming girls. Reshot off a monitor, the image is manipulated by playing with the sound controls. The sense of recorded time is gradually lost, and the twinkling of the girls' eyes celebrates an extended moment of excitement and panic.



Figure 8.1 Boryana Rossa, *Celebrating the Next Twinkling*, 1999. Video still.  
Courtesy of the artist

The major achievement of this particular *Crossing Over* work was that it was selected and included in the inaugural exhibition of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at Brooklyn Museum held between 23 March and 1 July 2007. Co-curated by Maura Reilly and Linda Nochlin, *Global Feminisms* was self-proclaimed as ‘the first international exhibition exclusively dedicated to feminist art from 1990 to the present’ at Brooklyn Museum and largely perceived as ‘high-minded’ and ‘homogeneous’ in the official art press (Schejldahl, 2007) or met with more mixed reviews in the art historical blogosphere (Haber, 2007). Rossa was the only Bulgarian artist featured showing her *Crossing Over* work alongside works of more than 80 women from around the world and only a few women artists from New Europe. An emblematic image from *Celebrating the Next Twinkling* was used for the cover of the exhibition catalogue (Reilly and Nochlin, 2007) as well as for assorted exhibition merchandise (Figure 8.1).

Rossa’s work emerged from a curatorial brief, free of any gender underpinnings. In fact, the curatorial theme for *Crossing Over* held in December 1999 at Ljubljana Digital Media Laboratory was set to counteract the millennium frenzy at the threshold of 2000 through the aesthetics of digital minimalism. This could be construed as another

instance where unwittingly the legacy of the *Crossing Over* project has surpassed the confines of its initial set up which in the curatorial sense, was largely located outside of the contemporary art world. Rossa's work is further discussed in chapter 4.

### **Ivan Moudov *Simon Says ...* (1997)**

This theatrically staged, short artist's video *Simon Says...* (3 min) reflects the shallow display and bigotry of the established religions, as well as the spread of child-abusing religious cults. Some documentary images of revival meetings are also used. Ivan Moudov performs a symbolic protest against the organised religious cults. *Simon Says...* was selected by an independent curator as one of the highlights in the introspective touring programme *Crossing Over Time*. As Chris Byrne (2003, 8) points out in his selector's notes to the programme this 'challenging and emotional film calls to mind Andres Serrano's infamous image *Piss Christ* (1989)', a flattering comparison which positions Moudov's early work alongside other contemporary works of note, and thus, shortens the distance between the supposedly estranged cousins of the new media and contemporary art worlds.

What is significant is not whether the artist was aware or not of Serrano's photograph depicting a crucifix submerged in a glass container, allegedly full of the artist's own urine, but what Moudov staged and shot on location in an art gallery, an equally moving scene of a Christ urinating on a crucifix. The outcome is a graphic portrayal of the subculture of imported cults, a subculture which proliferated after the long Socialist years of repressed religious worship in Bulgaria and culminated in post-Socialist interest in joining various cults. Perhaps unwittingly, Moudov makes implicit creeping analogies between the political (art) world and the cult - this harmful network of rigid beliefs imposed by a charismatic leader with unlawful intentions. Perhaps a combination of tribal instincts, fears, uncertainties and anxieties, as we all seem to be vulnerable to modelling our own behaviour on others. Although Moudov created this *Crossing Over* work as his first artist's video while graduating at the National Fine Art Academy in Sofia, he has since produced and showed a number of single and multi-channel video installations earning himself the reputation of one of the most successful emerging artists from Bulgaria. Ten years after his initiation in the media art world with *Crossing Over 1* and *2*, he went on to be selected as one of the three artists representing Bulgaria at 52<sup>nd</sup> Venice Biennale, undoubtedly a high point in any contemporary artist's practice.

### **Lala Raščić *17 Stories* (2001)**

Lala Raščić's work is an experimental documentary short (3 min) about the experience of tower block living (see Centrefold). The loose narrative structure reveals a personal story of an artist who is trying to combat her fear of heights through filming her life in the 17<sup>th</sup> floor flat. In the retrospective touring programme *Crossing Over Time* Rasic's work was acknowledged as a 'vertigo-defying journey down the side of the building' (Byrne 2003, 6). In her evaluation of the project Kapur (2003, 3) who came across Rasic's work for the first time at the launch of the *Crossing Over Time* during Edinburgh International Film Festival, stated that she found her artist's video 'particularly strong'.

*17 stories* work has had a world-wide exposure, showing at film festivals such as *Kurtzfilmtage*, Oberhausen and 7th International Short Film Festival of the Iranian Young Cinema Society, Tehran. It has also been screened at highly prestigious institutions for contemporary art including the Renaissance Society in Chicago, the Museum of Modern Art and the Kitchen in New York, and Stedjelik Museum in Amsterdam. This mixed exhibition history is a testimony to the malleability of the *Crossing Over* works which depending on the curatorial intention at each touring or exhibiting venue were positioned in either their native new media context or the related contemporary art discourse.

### **Mare Tralla *Felt Boots* (2000)**

A short artist's video *Felt Boots* (3 min) was inspired by an anecdote from the time of the clash between the two 'evil empires': USSR and USA. Russian women clad in their traditional winter garb, a pair of felt boots, are thus equipped to sneakily win the ideological race on behalf of the USSR. Following the artist's video tradition of performing for the camera, Mare Tralla impersonates the walk and talk of a babushka but on the streets of mid-West America. Using the allegory 'thread softly' as inter-titles the artist symbolises imagined and real cross-cultural beliefs in a humorous way. The work further highlights 'the mutual misunderstandings between the cultures of East and West' (Byrne, 2003, 7). This work is exemplary for an artist known for her hilarious but equally sensitive visual statement on the historical construct of 'femininity' in post-Soviet culture (Dimitrakaki, 2005, 277). Tralla works with various media and often in an interdisciplinary style, combining oil painting with artist's video, live performance, staged photography and interactive installations. Her artistic practice is thus comfortably positioned between the two worlds of new

media and contemporary art.

Once completed and launched as part of *Crossing Over 5* at Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, Ohio, *Felt Boots* went on to acquire 'a life of its own'. It was selected and toured various specialised artist's films and video festivals including Videomedija in 2001, Novi Sad, 23<sup>rd</sup> Moscow International Film Festival in 2001, and Edinburgh International Film Festival in 2003. The film also featured in curated group exhibitions of contemporary art including *Breakthrough. Perspectives on Art from the 10 New EU States* at the non-conventional space Grote Kerk Den Haag, The Hague and *Strangers to Ourselves* co-curated by Maud Belleguic, Judith Stewart and Mario Rossi, a complex project which raised questions not only about migration, but about the politics of space and the potential of visual practice. Not surprisingly, and very appropriately, *Felt Boots* and the other 22 works featured, found themselves briefly occupying the basement of a former slaughterhouse. Most recently it was included in the first ever retrospective of the artist's films and video for the Threshold artspace, Perth, Scotland in 2011.

### **Kai Kaljo *Pathétique* (1999)**

This short artist's video (3 min 19 sec) combines humour and pathos in a real-life drama scenario. The idea came to Kaljo when she saw a man lying in the snow in front of her Tallinn flat and suddenly started filming his numerous attempts to stand up with dignity. Ludwig van Beethoven's *Piano Sonata No. 8 in C minor, op. 13* (1799), commonly known as *Pathétique* should be credited as the title-giver as well as for providing the soundtrack. This choice of music also reveals Kaljo's classical music background while explicitly portraying the artist herself juggling with her piano playing and video camera shooting.

Commissioned for Ljubljana's *Crossing Over 4* in 1999, Kaljo's work was featured in the touring exhibition and accompanying publication *Crossing Over Time* (Byrne, 2003). In 2005, Kaljo was picked up as a new artist by one of London's leading private galleries Anthony Reynolds. Her *Crossing Over* work found its way to the blue-chip art market as a limited edition 'projected video installation', another unexpected yet predictable trajectory for art films and videos which would begin their life as public commissions within independent new media festivals, and eventually, acquire the status and aura of rare, collectable works of contemporary art. This phenomenon is akin to what Lindsey Pollock (2009) describes in her thoughtful and measured discussion of a major topic in the increasingly borderless world of art as 'public art for private gain'. Advancing this

debate, Michael Rush (2009) also asserts that to deny the ever-expanding synergy between private galleries and museums or public institutions (for better or worse) would be shortsighted.

Galleries, including Anthony Reynolds, London and ARC Projects, Sofia in particular, which went on to represent the *Crossing Over* artists such as Moudov, Raščić and Tralla, work closely with major museums and institutions such as European Investment Bank in developing their long-term critical appreciation of the work of their artists. Reciprocally, there is not a non-profit museum in the world that does not cultivate relationships with private galleries, which often represent the work of the living artists, and whom the museum wants to exhibit or the estates of the deceased artists who are of the interest. As Rush (2009) observes ‘no major monographic exhibition of a contemporary artist has been accomplished without the support of the artist’s gallery (which sometimes means financial support, a subject of further discussion)’ (p. 1). Anthony Reynolds Gallery would be well-placed to assist in securing loans for exhibitions from private individuals or collections, who may have acquired Kaljo’s *Pathétique*. It is thus the role of the curator, regardless of their focus on contemporary new media art, to initiate and sustain such relationships with representing galleries.

### **Phil Collins *The Romance. The Commercial* (2001)**

Elaborating on the genre of portraiture, this short video (3 min) originated as a moving portrait of the indigenous and transient communities in and around Liverpool. Not unlike some of the other artists’ works which have emerged as *Crossing Over* public commissions, *The Romance. The Commercial* foregrounds the body as a site for exploration of desire, loss and personal expression. Utilising the split-screen format as if to comment on the ‘before’ and ‘after’ subculture of makeover television shows, Collins ‘looks at issues of costume and gender: a study of shifting identities made possible through the application of cosmetics’ (Byrne, 2003, 7). This work is also characteristic of Collins’ approach to working in collaboration with various groups of people; instigating unpredictable or well-staged encounters the artist encourages people to reveal their individuality, making the personal public with sensitivity, generosity and humour. His public commission for *Crossing Over* is symptomatic for his intimate engagement with his subjects – a process he describes as ‘a cycle of no redemption’ (Collins, 2006) and as important for his practice as the final presentation in the gallery.

The world premiere of *The Romance. The Commercial* was transmitted and webcast on the tenantspin channel; it was a Liverpool-based community-driven Internet TV project co-managed by FACT, Liverpool (Foundation for Art and Creative Technology) and Arena Housing, Liverpool. The premiere was preceded with interviews with the artist, curator and the FACT's Director at the tenantspin studio set up as a live chat-room – an opportunity for excluded citizens, aged over 50, to partake in the cultural process of production and dissemination of the public commission. The online premiere on tenantspin channel was thus an apt recognition of the largely excluded Liverpool-based communities featured in Collins' work. In support of the blurred borderlines of new media art and contemporary art, it is worth noting that tenantspin was originally created in 1999 and since sustained in conjunction with Danish artists' group Superflex and the Superchannel community who also like Collins occupy the no man's land of new media and established contemporary art. Five years after the commissioning and curating of *The Romance. The Commercial*, Collins was shortlisted for the career-defining Turner Prize 2006.

Extending his performance-based and conceptual approaches to video and photography, Collins continued to explore the nuances of social relations in various locations and global communities. In 2006 he visited Belgrade. He spoke of 'the massive joy and absolute privilege' of showing his works in Belgrade. His *free fotolab* (2007) 'germinated' at the flea markets of Belgrade, as well as amongst his refugee friends in London. People were encouraged to donate their old rolls of films, to be developed free of charge in exchange for the artist's right to use the images in any way he wanted. A public contract of an artwork, the death of 35mm colour film aestheticized the photographic apparatus of representation and demystified 'a heartfelt yet troubled exchange' (Nedkova, 2007, 52).

### **Desktop Icons works**

*Desktop Icons* project included 23 works by 25 artists from 10 countries including the United Kingdom, Japan, Germany, South Korea, Croatia, France, Austria, the USA, and Australia. The programme has toured to 26 international destinations, and as far afield as Warsaw and Winnipeg; Bogota and Berlin. I have identified six subthemes or channels of popular culture in the *Desktop Icons* programme. This 'channel hopping' (Brown, 2003) reflected the way popular culture is often perceived through electronic media filters: computer games, information design, advertising, news bulletins and music promos. The works in



*Desktop Icons* decoded these media filters in search of hidden messages with a fair bit of humour, critique and bold attitude. In the process, the artists formulated new visual styles and stretched the boundaries of what was once known as cinematic reality.

## **YOUNG HAE CHANG HEAVY INDUSTRIES**

### **Artistic Statement N: 45,730944**

#### ***The Perfect Artistic Website (2000)***

YOUNG HAE CHANG HEAVY INDUSTRIES (aka Young-hae Chang, born and lives in Seoul, South Korea and Marc Voge, born in USA, lives in Seoul) made about 35 films by 2006. This artist duo exploits the seemingly endless narrative possibilities of animated text accompanied by instrumental music. Their early work selected for *Desktop Icons* entitled *Artistic Statement N: 45,730944 The Perfect Artistic Website* (2000) is a 6 min long video. Alongside Simon Ellis' *Telling Lies* (2000), which also featured in the *Desktop Icons* exhibition program, *Artistic Statement* constructed human melodramas by using dynamic typography and humour. I have speculated that perhaps these works are about the art of subtitles coming centre stage, demonstrating the impact of information and graphic design upon a new breed of artists. However, Chang and Voge don't subscribe to the overly designed values but rather strip their films of interactivity, colour or playful fonts. It is the well-scripted text that reigns primacy over the visuals, delivering its verdict on our fascination and frustration with the Internet (Figure 8.2).

YOUNG-HAE CHANG HEAVY INDUSTRIES' work including *Artistic Statement...* remain hovering between the two worlds, between experimental cinema and concrete poetry, in particular as asserted by Jana and Tribe (2006, 94) in their survey of landmark new media artworks by selected artists. The opening credits of Chang and Voge's works would always include the title screen 'YOUNG-HAE CHANG HEAVY INDUSTRIES presents' and the numerical countdown similar to those preceding the early films. On the other hand, the artists would increasingly enjoy the high recognition of the contemporary art world exemplified by their subsequent Tate commission *The Art of Sleep* (2006) for the Tate Online Collection whose launch coincided with the opening of the Frieze Art Fair 2006 in London. Not unlike *Artistic Statement...* their Tate commission employed the usual mix of animated black and white typography, jazzy music and humor, while trying to explore the intricacies of the international art world from a disillusioned artist's perspective.

# AM I JUST USING WEB ART

Figure 8.2 YOUNG HAE CHANG HEAVY INDUSTRIES, *Artistic Statement N: 45,730944 The Perfect Artistic Website*, 2000. Video still. Courtesy of the artists

When contemplating the reasons why YOUNG-HAE CHANG HEAVY INDUSTRIES have been embraced by the art world in a way that few new media artists have or why the duo's work have been appreciated more in the mainstream art world than among new media aficionados Tribe (2006) points out:

“Perhaps this is because their work resembles older art forms, [...] and because its emotionally expressive voices and dynamic visual qualities communicate across disciplinary boundaries.” (p. 3)

Tribe further attributes their mainstream success to the fact that:

“Unlike most net art, their work is user-friendly, even for those who find computers alien and discomfoting: no small, hard-to-read text, no hunting and clicking, no decisions to make, no forms to complete or files to upload. Works like *Bust Down the Doors!* and *The Art of Sleep* capture one's attention, hold it for a short time, and then come to a decisive conclusion. They don't leave one wondering if one has explored enough, or discovered every hidden link. To a time-starved, attention-challenged audience, YOUNG-HAE CHANG HEAVY INDUSTRIES offer conciseness and captivating clarity.” (p. 3)

It is the Internet which is the natural habitat for YOUNG-HAE CHANG HEAVY INDUSTRIES' works while the *Desktop Icons* presented an opportunity to take their message to a new, cinematic and large-scale level; another curatorial strategy to unleash the potential of new media art into the context of contemporary art.

### **Kristin Lucas *5 Minute Break* (2001)**

The influx of computer games and the acceleration of just about everything were concerns in a number of *Desktop Icons* works, including Lucas' *5 Minute Break* (2001) (Figure 8.3 and Centrefold). Not unlike the other selected works, Kristin Lucas' (born in Davenport, lives in Oakland, USA) short video (4 min 35 sec) also questions game aesthetics by re-tooling the scenery and inventing new 'skins' for the characters or even undressing the pre-coded game world itself. The result is an interesting twist on gaming culture, mixed with experimental digital 'faction'. In particular, Lucas re-invents Lara Croft of *Tomb Raider*. Predating the attacks of September 11th 2001, Lucas's Lara is a female avatar roaming relentlessly through the lower levels of the World Trade Center, as if the game console is left on an idle mode, programmed never to venture beyond. From the closing credits we gather that this part-fiction, part-factual work was designed during Lucas' participation in the World Views Artist-In-Residence Program at the World Trade Center. Post-factum, *5 Minute Break* is also a homage to her fellow-artists and others who died there. Pertinently, the realistic environment as shot by Lucas resembles 'an underworld, a forgotten or haunted place - a space that translates well into the genre of first-person, role-play game' (Nedkova, 2002a, 4). Lucas' vision thus captures a lost realm - an underground maze of empty stairwells, faded graffiti, hulking machinery, and discarded trash. It creates a haunted netherworld of dead-ends and detritus beneath the mythologised World Trade Center.

Lucas occupies more of an ambiguous zone, treading between the territories of new media and contemporary art. It was in the year 2001 when she created *5 Minute Break* that Lucas had her commercial gallery solo debut *Alias* at Postmasters, New York, the gallery which has been representing her ever since. Rachel Green (2001) reiterates this notion of ambiguity and no-man-land-ness: 'If you hold the work of Valie Export and Adrian Piper dear, you will want to see what Kristin Lucas makes. Perhaps the comparison is premature since *Alias* is her first solo show in New York, but, at the very least, her themes including spirituality, technology and the body politics and her impressive exploration of



Figure 8.3 Kristin Lucas, *5 Minute Break*, 2001. Video still. Courtesy the artist

complex ideas, put her in a category far apart from the ‘gallerina’ clique currently grabbing the spotlight in the New York art scene’.

Her work was included in the 1997 Biennial exhibition of the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York followed by recognition of the mainstream contemporary art community - a public commission entitled *Between a Rock and a Hard Drive* (1998), an Internet-based artwork by Dia Center for the Arts, New York. Revisiting the introduction to this early commission one is struck that Sarah Tucker’s (1998) comments resonate with the consistency and recurrent themes which Lucas has been pursuing: ‘In her previous video and performance works, Lucas has addressed the anxiety, isolation and paranoia that have accompanied our shift to mediated communication, ubiquitous surveillance, video game culture, hallmarks of a society in which most of our vital information and systems are controlled by computers and networks vulnerable to viruses, hackers and internal flaws. But in this work, Lucas weaves together the conventions which have grown out of these systems to make something that takes them at their surface value, a value which Mark Taylor argues in his book *Hiding* is one which deserves a closer look’.

### **Matthias Müller *Breeze* (2000)**

Matthias Müller is at the forefront of a new generation of contemporary artists ‘dusting away the charm of classic movies in archaeological quests for symbolic meanings. Through their fascination with archive film, artists have asserted that what is found in the footage is what matters’ (Nedkova 2002a, 8). Müller’s *Breeze*, 1 min video and Michael Maziere’s *Blackout* (also featured in *Desktop Icons*) demonstrate a strong poetic sensibility towards found material. They both construct intense emotional narratives, testing our collective cinematic memory. Initially conceived as a trailer, *Breeze* (see Centrefold) is a ghostly loop of negative-printed out-takes from feature films. As Krajewski (2009, 64) points out that working with found footage is ‘one of the most anarchistic, radical, independent and formalistic, but at the same time critical and creative film practices’.

Müller emerged from a group of experimental film-makers from Germany who began in the 1980s to revive a more narrative style, including surrealistic props. As noted by Peter Zorn (2008) in his comprehensive *Dossier of Media Art in Germany*, Müller’s films are:

“Distinguished both by their formal mastery and intense atmospheric effects, he builds them up by using psychologically associative montage to reawaken autobiographical events or by exaggerating film structures and motifs through deconstructive repetition, thus uncovering underlying

subconscious levels.” (Zorn, 2008, 3)

Zorn exemplifies Müller’s style with his film *Home Stories* (1990), which not unlike *Breeze* is based on the found footage from old Hollywood melodramas. Originally commissioned for the Vienna International Film Festival, *Breeze* was shot on 35mm with colour and sound, and soon afterwards, broke free from the film festival context to appear away from the cinema’s black box and enter the gallery’s white cube. (Figure 8.4)



Figure 8.4 Matthias Müller, *Breeze*, 2000. Video still. Courtesy of the artist

Like most of his fellow artists, at the end of the 1990s Müller began to work with digital video cameras and desktop film-making instead of the 16mm format. Since 1999, he has collaborated with the Hanover-based video artist Christoph Girardet. In 2006, their found footage work *Kristall* was awarded the German Film Prize and the First Prize from Canal + for the best short film at the 59th Cannes International Film Festival. The work thus continues Müller’s exploration of film aesthetics, begun in *Home Stories* and *Breeze*. What is most important is that alongside Müller’s recognition at the mecca of the film industry, his films and installations are also acquired by the prestigious public collections of contemporary art such as Tate, London, Centre Pompidou, Musée National d’Art Moderne, Paris, and the Museu d’Art Contemporani, Barcelona. His films and videos have

been presented at the prestigious exhibitions, such as the Documenta X, Kassel; the European Biennial of Contemporary Art Manifesta 3, Ljubljana and in numerous museums including MOMA, New York, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, and Musee du Louvre, Paris. By 2009, Müller emerged as one of the leading contemporary artists who are equally at home in the new media art and the upper echelons of contemporary art.

### **Concluding comments**

The examples of the works from both *Crossing Over* and *Desktop Icons* projects discussed in this chapter provide us with the evidence of the blurring the boundaries between new media and the contemporary art. In their own distinctive way, the selected works by these European artists seem to ascertain that there is no need for a distinct curatorial theory and practice of new media art. It seems that it is the responsibility of the curator to shape up the context of the artist's work. It is an evolving curatorial process of negotiating the complex relationships oscillating between love and hate, over the lifespan of an artwork, that have inspired the current attempt of revisiting some of the assumptions about curatorship, including the perceived need for a distinctness associated with curating new media art.

As part of the all-encompassing project of contemporaneity, curating new media art doesn't appear to need a specialized academic study, its own institutions, festivals, or gender awareness campaigns. The compelling evidence is that it is largely a curatorial duty and honour to resurrect the artists and artworks from the ideological camp of new media. It is the curator's understated role to blur the perceived borderline and mediate between the two worlds of contemporary art and new media art. How we apply the notion of gender construction and attribution to artists' works also appears to be one of the prerogatives of curatorship.

The more closely we analyse what we consider 'sexing the border' between contemporary art and new media art, the more clearly we will understand that eroticism is the feeling of excitement we experience at finding another human creative endeavor which shares the same values. In our attempt 'to counter the reductionism that frames human sexuality as a mere physiological phenomenon driven solely by our evolutionary biology' (Popova, 2013, 1), we should try to further our research into the concept of the 'sexual relationship' between contemporary art and new media art. The most encompassing point which we can make is perhaps an anthropological one. The way in which contemporary art culture treats new media art, whether with respect or disrespect, caringly or disparagingly, is a metaphor for how the arts in general are treated.

## Bibliography

- Brown, Liz. '15 Megabytes of Fame', *Channel 4's Ideas Factory Scotland: New Media: Features*, 2003.  
[http://Scotland.Ideasfactory.Com/New\\_Media/Features/Feature13.Htm](http://Scotland.Ideasfactory.Com/New_Media/Features/Feature13.Htm)
- Byrne, Chris. 'A World in Upheaval'. In Byrne, Chris (Ed.) *Crossing Over Time* Edinburgh: New Media Scotland, 2003a. 4-7.
- Clark, George. (Ed.) *Curatorial Resource for Artists' Moving Image*. The LUX: London, 2008. Accessed 20 March 2009.  
<http://crami.lux.org.uk/index.html>
- Collins, Phil., *Turner Prize Artist's Talk: Phil Collins*, webcast, Tate Britain, 2006. Accessed 28 February 2009.  
[http://www.tate.org.uk/onlineevents/webcasts/turner\\_prize\\_2006/phil\\_collins/default.jsp](http://www.tate.org.uk/onlineevents/webcasts/turner_prize_2006/phil_collins/default.jsp)
- Dimitrikaki, Angela. 'Five O'clock on the Sun'. Three Questions on Feminism and the Moving Image in the Visual Arts of Non-Western Europe', *Third Text*, 19(3): 269–282.
- Feminist Art Base, New York: Brooklyn Museum's Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, 2007.  
[https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/feminist\\_art\\_base/index.php](https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/feminist_art_base/index.php)
- Graham, Beryl. 'The Denizens are Restless in Turing-Land. New Media Art and Collaboration' *Switch*, 17: Collaboration, CADRE Laboratory for New Media of the School of Art and Design at San Jose State University, San Jose. 2002. Accessed 13 March 2009.  
[http://switch.sjsu.edu/nextswitch/switch\\_engine/front/front.php?artc=136](http://switch.sjsu.edu/nextswitch/switch_engine/front/front.php?artc=136)
- Green, Rachel. Kristin Lucas. *Frieze*, 60, June-August 2001, p.81
- Haber, John. 'Feminisms in the Singular', *Postmodernism and Art History*, 2007. <http://www.haberarts.com/globalf.htm>
- Hay, David. *Brief Interview about Glenlandia*, 2007 (the author's email interview with David Hay).
- Heartney, Eleanor. 'Can Art Criticism Survive the Market?' In Monkiewicz, Dorota (Ed.) *Art Criticism and Market*, AICA Polish Section, Warsaw, 2008, 22-25.
- Huldisch, Henriette and Iles, Chrissie. 'Keeping Time: On Collecting Film and Video Art in the Museum'. In Altshuler, Bruce (Ed.) *Collecting the New: Museums and Contemporary Art*. Princeton University Press, 2005, 65-83.
- Huntington, Samuel. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Touchstone Books, 1996.



- Kapur, Lisa. 'Crossing Over Time, *Artistic Evaluation – Visual Arts*, Scottish Arts Council, 14 August 2003.
- Kivimaa, Katrin. 'Mare Tralla. Stories of a 'Disgusting Girl': Cyberfeminist and Trans/national Techno-Laughter'. In Trossek, Andreas (Ed.) *Artists of Estonia 3* Tallinn: Centre for Contemporary Arts 2007, 16-25
- Kotik, Charlotta. 'Post-Totalitarian Art: Eastern and Central Europe'. In Reilly, M. and Nochlin, L. (Eds) *Global Feminisms: New Directions in Contemporary Art*, London and New York: Merrell and Brooklyn Museum, 2007, 153-165.
- Krajewski, Piotr. 'Recycled Images. Remix, Sampling, Scratching... About Found Footage Cinema'. In Kutlubasis-Krajewska, Violetta and Krajewski, Piotr (Eds) *Widok Wro Media Art Reader Issue 1: From Absolute Cinema to Future Film*. Wro Art Centre: Wroclaw, 2009, 64-69.
- Krysa, Joasia. (Ed.) *Curating Immateriality: The Work of the Curator in the Age of Network Systems*. Autonomedia (Databrowser 03), 2006.
- Littman, Brett. 'Who Owns Museum-Commissioned Works?' *Art Newspaper*, 197, 17 December 2008, p. 4.
- Nedkova, Iliyana. 'Belgrade. Breaking Step' *MAP Magazine*, summer 2007, p. 52.
- Nedkova, Iliyana. 'A New Generation of Europeans'. In Byrne, Chris, (Ed.) *Crossing Over Time*, Edinburgh: New Media Scotland, 2003. 2-3
- Nedkova, Iliyana. 'Desktop Iconography'. *Desktop Icons* Edinburgh: New Media Scotland, 2002a, 3-8.
- Nedkova, Iliyana. 'Consolations of Curatorial Inadequacies', In Cook et al (Eds.) *B.Read/6: Curating New Media*. Gateshead: Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art and Cornerhouse Publications, 2002b, 91-110.
- Nedkova, Iliyana. 'Crossing Over Dreams and Five Years of Crossing Over'. In Nedkova, Iliyana and Troy M. (Eds) *Crossing Over* Columbus: Wexner Center for the Arts, The Ohio State University 2001, 4-31.
- Nedkova, Iliyana and Troy M. (Eds) *Crossing Over*. Columbus: Wexner Center for the Arts, The Ohio State University, 2001.
- Paul, Christiane. (Ed.) *New Media in the White Cube and Beyond. Curatorial Models for Digital Art*, University of California Press, 2008.
- Reilly, Maura and Nochlin, Linda. (Eds) *Global Feminisms: New Directions in Contemporary Art*, London and New York: Merrell and Brooklyn Museum, 2007.

- Rush, Michael. 'Museums Lending To Commercial Galleries: The Debate'. *Art Newspaper*, 199, 25 February 2009, p. 3.
- Said, Edward. 'The Clash of Ignorance' *The Nation*, Issue 22, October 2001 <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20011022/said>
- Schjeldahl, Peter. 'Women's Work. Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum' *The New Yorker: The Art World*, 9 April 2007. [http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/artworld/2007/04/09/070409cra\\_w\\_artworld\\_schjeldahl](http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/artworld/2007/04/09/070409cra_w_artworld_schjeldahl)
- Stallabrass, Julian. *Art Incorporated. The Story of Contemporary Art* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Tribe, Mark. 'An Ornithology of Net Art', *Tate Intermedia Art*, 2006. <http://www.tate.org.uk/intermediaart/entry15274.shtm>
- Tucker, Sara. *Introduction to Kristin Lucas's Between a Rock and a Hard Drive*, Dia Center for the Arts, New York. 1998. Accessed on 20 March 2009. <http://www.diacenter.org/lucas/intro.html>
- Zilberg, Jonathan. Review of Krysa, Joasia (Ed.) *Curating Immateriality: The Work of the Curator in the Age of Network Systems*, *Leonardo*, *Leonardo Reviews On-line*, MIT Press. 2006. Accessed 13 March 2009. [http://www.leonardo.info/reviews/sept2006/curating\\_zilberg.html](http://www.leonardo.info/reviews/sept2006/curating_zilberg.html)
- Zorn, Peter. *Dossier Media Art in Germany*. 2008. <http://www.goethe.de/kue/bku/dos/mid/enindex.htm>

## CHAPTER NINE

# SEXING THE BORDER, LITERALLY? UTOPIAN TACTICS OF DEALINGS WITH/OUT INSTITUTIONS

KATARZYNA KOSMALA

### **Introduction**

This chapter articulates the emergence of an alternative discourse being produced in the contemporary Europe of today, where resistance to the ideological construct of the ‘periphery’ meets gender politics and the modes of production intersects with representation of difference. The chapter highlights the significance of spatial dynamics and attempts to identify viable political models for channelling a critical stance in contemporary European arts and in cultural production.

In particular, I set out to explore cultural tactics situated in the neo-liberal context of today’s Europe, tactics that point to alternative modes of instituting and relating to spaces of institutions and society. In the late 1990s alternative, artist-run, more or less self-organized art scenes emerged in a response to society’s overall low confidence in institutions in the context of the socio-economic situation. In particular, I will introduce and reflect on art practice broadly enveloped in what I refer to as feminist tactics of today, tactics that emerged out of a particular space, that is, in the post-Socialist realms. I begin from the premise that no European country at present can boast a successful elimination of the inequality pay gap or gender asymmetry in political representation. Against the backdrop of the effects of globalisation and the transformation of European spaces, through migration, on-going fluctuations on the labour markets, the sexualisation of the border and the erosion of the welfare states, I will investigate the examples of cultural production and dissemination, exploring their significance in this new intense and problematic milieu.

And from such a premise, I will discuss the instances of video and new media art that can be framed as critical practice.

The intersecting histories and cultures, shared traumas, and in particular recent geo-political conditions within post-Socialist reshaping of 21st century Europe, are embedded in the selection of cultural practices discussed here. Discussing the instances of cultural strategies, purposefully located at the intersection demarcated by tensions between institutional spaces and independent production, my reflections will focus on the Diaspora-infused artistic and curatorial strategies engaged in politically informed cultural practices of representation.

But what do we mean by alternative, feminist-led cultural practice of dissemination? These are a set of practices that appear to afford more illusionary hopes to those areas that are disempowered locally by the inertia caused by global Capitalism, and yet, also allow for some distance to be maintained from such 'utopian' pursuits. Accordingly, the following questions emerge: Can feminist-infused critiques become part of broader histories and social and political struggles, and whether feminist histories can transgress the market discourse infused by celebrity *art-lite*, drawing on Julian Stallabrass's term (1999), *art-lite* of international biennials, proliferation of art fairs as well as institutionalization and marketization of taste? Addressing these questions, I will discuss the examples of emergent practice involving geographies of the 'in-betweens' and the post-Socialist European scapes in particular, and their resistance tactics to potential assimilation by Capitalist institutions, and more generally, dealing with entrapments of institutionalization.

### **With/out institutions?**

The entrapment of artists and curators, critics or cultural producers within the complicated system of a structured institutionalized world of arts is not new, and can be perceived as both a threat and an opportunity. It is a condition that requires artists and producers to carefully balance between meeting public expectations and promoting original ideas, creating spectacular exhibitions and events and chasing individual dreams, obtaining funding and realising meaningful projects.

The current climate of global crisis frames the institutions as ever more powerful agents. Institutions keep on reinventing themselves, occupying an even more privileged position in the art discourse. At the same time, it is the consolidation of the global financial crisis as well as the reframing of the socio-political and economic 'transition' from post-Socialism in European spaces that have led to a strengthening of a critical political

discourse in contemporary art practice, a discourse based on a re-mobilisation of feminist politics and the re-writing of histories. Furthermore, extensive migration across the border of 'Fortress Europe' has fuelled nationalistic rhetoric and placed on the agenda a rewriting of neo-liberal sentiments, and even more so, seeking for their alternatives on both sides, East and West.

A critique of institutions depends on one's positioning; it is a matter of distance, or more precisely, a matter of being literally at a distance from the institutions on an ideological, epistemological, economic, and historic basis. Manuela Bojadzije drawing on Nirmal Puwar's work on global politics argues that in contemporary theorising it is the migrant who is frequently portrayed as an agency, and migration as a movement, symbolising the 'other' of democracy. She refers to Puwar's argument that it is either the black subject, the subaltern (fe)male, the migrant, and the exile that are in the spotlight today (Bojadzije, 2009). On one side, such representation seems to refer to a fascination with the subversive forces that are ascribed to the migration movement, the social struggle and the production of exclusion-based cultures. This fascination also reflects the artifice of the media representation of migration politics and migrants through the prism of exclusion discourse, and subsequently, such fascinations are paraphrased and narrated through visual culture. On the other side, such representation creates a certain ontological distancing, possibly constructing a comfortable space at the periphery of the systems.

Such a place creates what Danuta Mostwin (1995) defined as a third value, a new cultural category that merges elements originating in different localities through confrontation, but not necessarily by identifying with any particular position in the fixed terms. She argues:

"(...) as a result, it leads to another, richer way of thinking, enmeshed with an awareness of increased independence and personal development. This awareness of self-development, of confrontation with the self is a third value." (Mostwin, 1995, 235-236, translated from Polish)

This so-called new category of a third value becomes a space for a possible new episteme. Artists, writers and curators from the European Diaspora often live and work in what we can refer to as zeugmatic spaces, spaces that can be perceived simultaneously as a home and abroad. These are individuals who can engage with the epistemology of a third value. A new episteme is always in the making, never fixed, always emerging as an in-between position of simultaneous being in and being out; an intermediate form of identifying and dis-identifying. Such a position, in my view, has contributed to a revival of a politically engaged critical

voice, evident from recent theory advancement and curatorial initiatives of the new geographies and art scenes emerging out of Central and Eastern Europe.

Transitions in the post-Socialist context are not just economic but social and cultural, with the latter tending to take longer. Every change can be effectively seen as a chaotic polysemy, full of paradoxes of progression and retrogression in response to the new image of the 'new Europe', and associated with such an image are constructed or assumed shifting identities. Current experiences in the identity arena reveal an increase in dominant nationalistic discourses in which all forms of peripheral voices and minority rights are marginalized, including women's voices and alternative discourses of cultural and civil movements that appear 'tamed' through institutionalized structures both in the East and the West.

On-going re-framings of current socio-political conditions and attempts at negotiations with institutional realms as well as oscillating in a climate of a general dissolution of institutionalization in favour of networking organizations have resulted in cultural projects which question more directly the current socio-political reality and dominant ideologies in art production across Europe and beyond. Inevitably, such projects benefited from being less driven by institutional framings, working as self-organized creative units based on shorter term projects and mobilised by the visions of their co-ordinators, notably the initiatives led by Rael Artel's *Public Preparation* (2007-2012), Aneta Szyłak's *Alternativa* in Wyspa Institute of Art in Gdańsk (2010-ongoing) and Maria Hlavajova's *Former West* (2008-2014).

*Public Preparation* is a programme of workshops, meetings, publications and exhibitions co-ordinated from the rural periphery, from the forests of Estonia, on the outskirts of Tallinn. This programme investigated issues of politics, rising nationalism and contemporary arts production in Europe in the format of international knowledge exchange. The *Alternativa* initiative consists of a series of international exhibitions, art events, debates, publications and on-line activities, aimed to investigate the ways in which contemporary arts intersect with the political voice. Located in the premises of the Gdańsk shipyard, where the workers' strikes of 1980 began the process of the disintegration of the Communist bloc, and which is now a post-industrial space in an on-going regeneration battle, *Alternativa* addresses the recent histories of collective political movements, testing its possibilities and its failures (Figure 9.1). *Alternativa* is hosted by the Wyspa Art Institute, an art foundation that Thomas Wulffen (2007) referred to, operating under the perspective of institutional critique. As he noted, maybe such a form of an institution is

only possible under the specific political condition in the former East, under a rising conservative ideology of an institutional belief:

“in paradoxical turn one could say that the Wyspa Institute avoids becoming an institution by being an institution. But in special situations, Wyspa is an institution on an institution.” (p. 13)

It is also worth noting that Wyspa is the Polish word for an island, therefore the intent with regard to institutional framing was clear from the beginning. *Former West* takes the year 1989 as a critical landmark, repositioning socio-economic and political geographies of Europe to rethink global histories and futures of artistic practice, bringing together narratives articulated from the former East and former West of Europe. *Former West* attends to the so-called ‘block’ mentality and ‘post-block’ futures against the backdrop of neo-liberal Capitalist realms and is coordinated at the Basis Voor Actuele Kunst, in Utrecht, Netherlands.



Figure 9.1 The Wyspa Institute, Gdańsk, Poland. Photograph by the author.

Some forms of critical reframing of today’s socio-political conditions have placed the gender question central to their inquiries. Indeed, Bojana Pejić’s project which focused on gender differences in Central and Eastern

European art resulted in *Gender Check*, which was showcased in Vienna, Austria in 2009, and then in Warsaw, Poland in 2010. In association with the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Iron Curtain in 2007, ERSTE Foundation issued a call for international curatorial projects aimed at framing art forms from the new geographies of Eastern Europe. The research, the exhibition, and a symposium looked at both official and less official art from the region, demarcated by the Baltic Republics and the Caucasus, starting from the 1960s to the decisive events of 1989 to the present, and framed the work to demonstrate how it tackled gender. The strong undertone was that it addressed the politics of representation and representational politics in the ‘block’ and the ‘post block’ realities. Some of the questions that arose from the project included: How were workers depicted on Socialist posters? How were male ‘heroes’ portrayed in officially sanctioned art in Romania in the 1960s? How did female artists see themselves during the transition period after 1989?

Attempted answers resulted in *Gender Check: A Reader. Art and Theory in Eastern Europe* (2010), an edited collection of the essays investigating gender issues in the region by Bojana Pejić in collaboration with ERSTE, Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig, Vienna. The authors in the volume discuss how social and cultural developments as well as political ideologies affected the construction of gender identities in the visual arts produced before and after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and although there are references to the current political climate in the region (and rising nationalism and national constructions feature strongly), they are not critically addressed.

Interestingly, these politically charged, cross-border projects with a focus on multi-layered dissemination have been led by women, by merging private and professional spheres, and further, each representing different degrees of assimilation with the European Diaspora trends and negotiations of a safe distance from the institutional realms. This process of individualisation of artistic dissemination by freelance curators, activists and producers requires self-control and a strong political belief as well as a good connection network and flexibility of working. Most of all such a process requires a position where the balance of power and of production continuously shifts. As Jan Verwoert (2013) puts it:

“In the arts, the question of self-organization usually presents itself in very concrete terms: either you do it, or you drown. We are free to self-organize. But if we don’t, our lives tend to fall apart very quickly.”  
(Verwoert, 2013, 123)



## **Situating ambivalent micro-feminisms in the Central and Eastern European territories**

I would argue that ontological framings in emergent Diaspora-infused cultural strategies and dissemination practices, involving geographies of Central and Eastern Europe, interface at the junction of critical political voicing, performativity and local feminist histories. Some artists enact so called docu-fictions which attempt to expose the identity politics inherent within media rhetoric, such as the video works of Tallinn-based artist Eva Labotkin entitled *Woman in the Field* (2007) and *Belt* (2010) (see Centrefold).

Politicising the video medium, Labotkin comments on the ideological constructions of the '(mother) land' in today's politics in the context of reinventing a new independent Estonia by mythologizing its roots signified by local folklore. The relationship with one's place is demarcated here by giving a birth to the land; a heavily pregnant woman standing in the middle of an open field is giving birth to black soil. The artist comments on our relationship with the land, with territory, and emphasises a woman's role in the production of national ideals in relation to national belonging, constructing a political discourse on re-territorialisation of the new nation. Labotkin (2011) points out reflecting on *Woman in the Field*:

“Problems arise only when this relationship [with the land], becomes a myth and is harnessed in the service of political ambitions, when the circle of life becomes a race and individuals become statistical units.”(Labotkin, 2011, 6)

The video is a comment on the construction of political discourse in new Europe. Other forms of representation on reproducing nationhood and identity politics are addressed by Belgrade-born and Rotterdam-based Katarina Zdjelar's video *Don't Do it Wrong!* (2007). In the morning in a typical Turkish primary school the *Independence March* national anthem is first heard, with a group of children chanting reminiscent of a military drill (Figure 9.2). This is followed by the children's collective pledge as they gather together and cite: “I devote my existence to being a gift to the Turkish existence”. Zdjelar comments on the role of state institutions in socialising citizenship and their bio-power in daily life creating “appropriate citizens of the nation” (texts from the video).



Figure 9.2 Katarina Zdjelar, *Don't Do it Wrong!* 2007. Video stills.  
*Let's Talk about Nationalism* Exhibition, KUMU, Tallinn 2010.  
Courtesy of Rael Artel

Warsaw-based Joanna Rajkowska project *Airways* (2008) is a video-proposal for a project on the contemporary situation in Hungary, addressing multi-ethnicity and origins of Hungarian nation. She created the proposal - a project that has at its core, philosophical values behind democracy. Rajkowska invited to her project the far-right para-political, racist-infused organisation members of *Magyar Garda* and *Goj Motorosok*, and the

citizenship-minority groups based in Hungary, which includes Roma people, Croats, Serbs, Germans, Poles, Romanians, Jews, Chinese, Vietnamese, Ukrainian and Russian as well as individuals representing different sexual minorities. Together, they flew over Budapest together in a small tourist plane (Figure 9.3). Rajkowska (2010) explained her motivation behind *Airways*:

“An attempt to reformulate basic human relations, where suddenly what is instinctive and physical influences the political, obviously as an illusionary moment.” (Rajkowska, 2010)



Figure 9.3 Joanna Rajkowska, *Airways*, 2008. 2-channel video installation. Video still. *Let's Talk about Nationalism* Exhibition, KUMU, Tallinn 2010. Courtesy of Rael Artel

The question is whether such artistic voices are necessary? After all, art production is now closely integrated with global Capitalism, both economically and socially, and is largely subservient to the institutional system of production via the market. I have explained in the *Third Text* essay that echoes of alternative cultural forms of production that seem to be coveted today, can be found in the Marxist-inspired social activism of the first half of the 20th century that emerged predominantly in the West, as well as in the underground and neo-avant-garde movements in the Central and Eastern European spaces in the second half of the 20th century (Kosmala, 2010, 542-543). Yet, in searching for alternative voices in this cultural turn, beyond the cynical play with neo-liberal rhetoric, there is a need to assess the elements of its resistance to dominant Capitalist logic

and its institutional forms. Although it is commonly agreed that art has become assimilated into the corporate Capitalist system of (re)production and consumption, contested spaces of struggle for artistic voices other than those of neo-liberal individualism, inflated celebrity culture and consumerism, remain.

No doubt artists such as Eva Labotkin, Joanna Rajkowska and Katarina Zdjelar operate in what I refer to as zones of insignificance, a psycho-geographical space that encourages critical thinking; the artistic tactics they choose to adopt are situated at some distance from the institutions and dominant market discourses. It seems to be a safe distance. By a safe distance, I mean, a space allowing some divergence from hegemonic assumptions and capitalisation of art production, a space for dissent that is not ready to be immediately incorporated and contained in an institution.

We could argue that the historical roots of feminism in the Central and Eastern Europe have particular characteristics and include an apotheosis of a private space and a preference for more subversive positioning. By subversion, I mean here an assumed attitude in cultural and political tactics that continue to openly resist patriarchy and the dominant ideology of Stalinist versions of Communism in the 1970s and the 1980s and under contemporary corporate global Capitalism

Over time, Communism created a divide between private and public spheres. Whilst in the West at that time the public sphere was where the struggle for equality discourse (gender equality) was located, in the East it was perceived as the sphere of exploitation and a form of oppression. The private sphere, however, was recognised as a sphere signifying autonomy and resistance. The private space meant openness and communication for those marginalised by the system. Underground artistic movements thrived in the realms of informal spaces such as private apartments, in informal groupings or on the street. Such art production and its dissemination were realised outside the institutions, as a cultural and political effort to disconnect from the dominant ideology and censorship. In feminist art practices and dissemination tactics, it was a terrain for contesting the Socialist paradigm of womanhood. The feminist root in the alternative art practices of resisting in Central Europe today derives from this historical divide between the signifying context of the 'private' and the 'public'. Michaela Mudure (2006) points out the complexity and ambiguous character of this particular link between Central and Eastern European feminisms and Communism. This relationship requires that we understand the co-ordinates of the ideological appropriation of feminisms and a survival of some feminist spaces in the discourse of women's emancipation entailed by Communism (Kosmala, 2010, 545). In discussing the link between

Communism and feminism, she seems to identify the source of oppression: while Communism relied on the category of class, feminism relied on the category of gender (Mudure, 2006, 420).

Historical appropriation of the female body as a symbol of a nation, as a nucleus of a family structure and its importance in the productivity of a nation is perpetuated today in the emergence of conservative political discourse as Eva Labotkin's videos overtly commented upon. Indeed, Communist paradigms of Socialism and its accompanying rhetoric of 'equality' have been replaced with the 'new' return of a traditional female signifier. Yet, the ambiguous position of belonging to and being on the periphery of Europe as well as marginal places of influence in the cultural discourse further complicates nationalistic identity construction, where identity is gendered. This in-between position can be extended further and reflected in the problems associated with sexing the border; mass migratory movements of cheap labour and the boom in human trafficking across Fortress Europe.

### **Preparing the public politically**

*Public Preparation* was set up in 2007, as a curatorial project enveloped in a participatory strategy. Curator, Rael Artel framed the *Public Preparation* as a project aimed at addressing issues associated with topical socio-economic and political conditions across the Europe of today, in particular the rise of various versions of nationalisms and state-appropriated forms of collective memory 'boom'. Artists, activists and curators explored ideologically-infused habits and rituals as well as mechanisms behind their functioning.

The project was formed as a platform for knowledge exchange and network-based communication, focusing on contemporary art practice and critical thought, and bringing together international art professionals, exhibition spaces of a more formal and informal nature, as well as cultural institutions to engage in questioning the role of the arts in public life and artists' position in political discourse. A series of events were organised between 2007 and 2012, resulting in a contextual framing with the international exhibitions *Let's Talk about Nationalism! Between Ideology and Identity* in 2010 in Tallinn at Kumu Art Museum, and *Between Ideology and Identity, Budapest Version* in 2011, in Labor gallery in Budapest (Figure 9.4).

The overarching theme for the *Public Preparation* was political in nature, oscillating around a debate that emerged out of a concern around growing nationalisms across Central and Eastern Europe in particular but

also beyond, creating a platform for asking questions about the current political climate and its impact on contemporary arts. Rich comparative perspectives on the construction of nationalism that emerged out of the five year project included insights from ‘new’ Europe or the former East, represented by Ukraine, Poland, Slovenia, Serbia, Lithuania, Estonia, Hungary, and ‘old’ Europe or the former West, by Germany, Belgium, Netherlands, Denmark, Austria and Greece, with insights of non-European or European-maybe-to-be perspectives such as Turkey, Russia and Israel. Rael Artel explained that over several years of her curatorial practice, the majority of the participants represented the geographies of Central and Eastern Europe:

“My aim has never been to organize a kind of ‘Olympic Games’ with an equal representation for all nations but the selection of the participants has been closely connected to the practice of these people, what they do and how they think.” (Rael Artel in a virtual interview Katarzyna Kosmala, 19-20 February 2011)

Since the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the Socialism of the Soviet Union, Central and Eastern Europe witnessed a proliferation of democracies. The 21st century in this part of the world has been demarcated by the rise of conservatism in politics dressed in dominant masculinities; intolerance, nationalistic sentiments and neo-liberal tendencies mixed with a nostalgia for the past. As the crisis in ‘Fortress Europe’ unfolds, there is a need to motivate collective action, as Charles Esche in his essay ‘Imagine Resistance’ in *Public Preparation* (2010) argues, there is a need for mobilizing the artistic perspective in imagining the world differently, offering the opportunity to change our living environments.

Over the years, *Public Preparation* materialised in several seminars and discursive events including several critical presentations and reflective conversations on the current condition in the arts and politics, two publications and international exhibitions with a number of new artworks, followed by press coverage and a critical reception in the mass media. For instance, the international symposium on symptoms of nationalism in the practice of contemporary art held in Pärnu, Estonia, in Artists’ House in 2008, brought together a network of theorists, artists and curators from Winnipeg, Eindhoven, Istanbul, Tel Aviv, Dublin, Vienna, Istanbul, Berlin, Paris, Budapest and Kiev to address the questions of art’s role in politics and the artist’s role in the processes of resistance, discussing different perspectives and points of view representing European and non-European geographies. A year after, in Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź, Poland,

*Crisis Special of Public Preparation* was held; a seminar-workshop addressing links between nationalisms, neo-liberal capitalist economy and contemporary arts. There, Marina Gržinić (2010) addressed global Capitalism in a frame of turbo-fascism:

“On the one hand, you have the unification of the national body, war, fear etc. On the other hand, you have autonomy. ...if you have money, you have a style, you can be a punk, a hippie etc. Why is it actually called post-modern fascism? Because this involves the fragmentation of the social where practically each of us has to be in charge only of our self. So, it is a global format of governmentality meaning to know how to behave today in the crisis, to actually manage yourself, not to say too much, not to say too little, to be careful not to lose your job, etc.” (Gržinić, 2010, 56)

Opening: March 21, 7pm  
 Venue: Labor, Képiró u 6, Budapest  
 On view: March 22 throughout April 5, 2011  
 Opening hours: Tue–Fri 4pm–7pm

Organizer: Hungarian University of Fine Arts  
 Supporters: Budapest Spring Festival; Center for Contemporary Arts, Estonia; Hungarian University of Fine Arts; National Cultural Fund of Hungary

[www.publicpreparation.org](http://www.publicpreparation.org)  
[labor.c3.hu](http://labor.c3.hu)

**YOU ARE CORDIALLY INVITED!**

**Budapest Version**

**BETWEEN IDEOLOGY AND IDENTITY**

Artists: Kaspars Goba  
 Wojciech Doroszuk  
 Eduard Freudmann & Ivana Marjanović  
 Flo Kasearu & Tanel Rannala  
 Eva Labotkin  
 Johannes Paul Raether  
 R.E.P.  
 Shlomi Yaffe  
 Katarina Zdjelar

Curator: Rael Artel

Figure 9.4 *Public Preparation Between Ideology and Identity, Budapest Version* 2011. Poster. Courtesy of Rael Artel

Łódź-based Iza Desperak talked about the problem of hate as a form of escapism in relation to frustration with Capitalism. Copenhagen-based Jens Haaning talked about the possibilities and impossibilities of revolution, addressing questions of increasing and all-encompassing consumption. Rael Artel explained that she has tried, via the *Public Preparation* project, to contribute to a public sphere by ‘producing’ a kind of emergent critical discourse that stimulated politically-charged discussions that are now topical in Estonia as well as in other parts of former Eastern Europe and beyond.

The publication: *Public Preparation. Contemporary Nationalism and Critical Art Practices* (2010) was launched at Wiels Contemporary Art Centre in Brussels in December 2010, together with screening of Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid’s 19 min 27 sec video *Naked Freedom* (2010) (Figure 9.5).



Figure 9.5 Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid, *Naked Freedom*, 2010. Video still.  
Courtesy of the artists

The choice of the spaces and forms of institutional affiliation are critical for projects such as *Alternativa* or *Public Preparation*. The Wyspa Institute of Art in Gdańsk is one of the most symbolic and mythical spaces of the Central Eastern European geographies, situated on the declining shipbuilding site. Once the cradle of the Solidarity movement, it now



awaits a blue print for its post-industrial restructuring. The contemporary tensions in which the site is enveloped become the platform for addressing art production today by seeking alternative political framings for sustainable economies and cultural production to thrive. Aneta Szyłak (2007) points out the central mission of the Wyspa Foundation is to take over buildings, sites and spaces and transform them into art places when promoting experimental art that is context-focused. Institutional framework acts, she argues, as an interface allowing for intellectual innovation and performativity of the Wyspa's actions (Szyłak, 2007, 34-35). Yet, many of the buildings Szyłak referred to in the mission statement do not exist anymore; they were demolished.

In 2012, Austrian Vienna-based artist Oliver Ressler's *Alternative Economies, Alternative Societies* project was showcased at the Wyspa Institute, the home of *Alternativa*. Ressler's 8-channel video installation *What is Democracy?* (2009) (Figure 9.7 and Centrefold) offers insights into peripheral theories, localised art practices and socio-economic forms of organisation, which the projects such as *Alternativa* or *Public Preparation* also explored. The book-catalogue published by Wyspa under the title *Alternative Economies, Alternative Societies* (Szyłak and Ressler, 2007) features the text-transcripts of Ressler's 8-channel video installation showcased in Wyspa in 2012, including among others Chaia Heller talking about libertarian municipalities; Takis Fotopoulos addressing inclusive democracy; Michael Albert discussing participatory economics; Paul Cockdhott reflecting on the possibilities of new Socialism; Marge Piercy talking about feminist utopias; Rafał Burnicki discussing anarchist consensual democracy; Maria Mies addressing the notion of subsistence; Nancy Folbre advocating caring labour; Christopher Spehr arguing for a free co-operation; and texts historically framing workers' collectives in places such as former-Yugoslavia (Todor Kuljić), Spain (Salome Molto) and France (Alain Delotel) (see Centrefold). In the latest edition of *Alternativa* exhibition entitled *Materiality* in 2013, Oliver Ressler's video documentary produced with Dario Azzellini *Comuna under Construction* (2010) was shown. The video describes how inhabitants of favelas in Caracas, Venezuela take part in community led management and democratic decision-making via *consejos comunales* (communal councils). These are 'minor' voices, yet, I would argue, voices that aim at broadening perspectives on various other social and economic forms of organisation, alternative institutional affiliations and art production today (Figure 9.6).



Figure 9.6 Dario Azzellini and Oliver Ressler, *Comuna Under Construction*, 2010. Film 94 min. Video still. Courtesy of Oliver Ressler



Figure 9.7 Oliver Ressler, *What is Democracy?* 2009. An 8-channel video installation. Installation view. Courtesy of Oliver Ressler

In the 2011 edition of *Alternativa*, two exhibitions were organized *Labour and Leisure* showcasing ‘atypical’ perspectives on work and a worker, and *Estrangement* that focused on immigration conditions and issues of operating in different cultural realms. Several works that were

shown dealt with a question of gender in an explicitly political manner. In the *Leisure and Labour* exhibition Gdańsk-based artist Michał Szlaga's four meter long photomural *Pixel Prostitutes* (2011) showcasing girls in bikinis (Figure 9.8 and Centrefold), standing by a forest road, a common site across many Polish transit routes, was commissioned by *Alternativa*.

“Always carry a pen and a small pad of paper. Write down licence plate numbers, the location where you will be, and other important information. Always carry something that can be used as a weapon – a hair spray, or keys. Wear shoes that you are able to run in. Avoid necklaces and scarves as these could be used to choke you. Walk around the car to look in it to ensure that nobody is hiding in there. Run against traffic, not with it...”  
(Michał Szlaga, 2011, in *Alternativa* catalogue).



Figure 9.8 Michał Szlaga, *Pixel Prostitutes*, 2011. Photomural. Exhibition view *Alternativa* 2011. Courtesy of the artist

In the *Estrangement* exhibition, Sulaymaniyah-based, Kurdish artist Rozhgar Mahmud Mustafa's slideshow documenting women reclaiming visibility in public spaces in contemporary Sulaymaniyah, Iraqi Kurdistan, featured women drinking tea and playing dominos at several teahouses (see Centrefold). The project *Public Space and Women* was realised in 2009 in collaboration with another Sulaymaniyah-based, Kurdish artist Avan Sdiq.

Similar to *Alternativa's* focus on merging local with international showcasing, *Public Preparation* has developed into the international exhibition *Let's Talk about Nationalism! Between Ideology and Identity* which showcased at the Kumu Art Museum in Tallinn, Estonia in 2010 and subsequently the *Budapest Version* in 2011 in Budapest, Hungary. The curatorial strategy addressed not only the arts and politics interface but also the relationships between the institutional establishment and critically infused art production. For instance, Tallinn-based artist Tanya Muravskaya's installation *Monuments* (2008) (see Centrefold) which featured in the exhibition, refers to conflicts arising in association with the processes of commemorating the past in public spaces and the re-writing of histories through the treatment of their material signifiers; public monuments. She explained:

“Two equal mounds – one of limestone, the other of glass. Limestone is the historical calling card of industrial Estonia and the former Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic. It was precisely this limestone wall that used to be the background for the concerned-looking soldier in the Monument to the Liberators of Tallinn. The installation's glass section represents Estonia's newest, renovated, Europeanised and Euro-repaired history. The loose body of broken glass is a reflection of the construction of a new monument close to the displaced soldier.” (Muravskaya, 2010, 79)

The works in the exhibition in 2010 in Tallinn and in 2011 in Budapest were displayed according to three key themes: ideological habits, reproduction of a nation, and conflicts. The aim of the exhibition reflected the overarching theme of *Public Preparation*, namely to open up a debate for addressing the role of arts participation in the challenging public sphere of today. The idea was to map and to better understand the notion of contemporary nationalist discourse and critical art practice in today's European context. The curator argues in the exhibition catalogue:

“The main generators of contemporary nationalism are two forces: firstly, the ever increasing mobility of large human groups and mass migration and, secondly, globalisation and the increase in power wielded by supranational [bodies]”, “while immigrants are primarily seen as an economic threat [in populism] and nationalism is expressed through xenophobic and racist attitudes and behaviour; globalisation and international power structures are considered to be a threat to national identity.” (Real Artel, the Curator's forward to the Exhibition, 2010).

The conceptual installation work in the exhibition with explicit political content, by Copenhagen-based artist Jens Haaning, *Eesti* (2010)

consists of a white cube space with the monumental black text *EESTI*, (Figure 9.9) which means Estonia in Estonian which highlights a disassociation from the previously predominant Russian language enforced under the Soviet era. Budapest-based artist Csaba Neme's oil paintings (see Centrefold) feature as a documentary medium to portray crime locations associated with the racist murders of Roma people by a group of right-wing fanatics from Hungary: "The only thing we see are rural houses" the artists evokes, as in one of his paintings *Yellow House* (2009).



Figure 9.9 Jens Haaning, *Eesti* 2010. Mural, installation 882 × 657 × 396 cm.  
Exhibition view *Let's Talk about Nationalism* KUMU Tallinn 2010.  
Courtesy of Rael Artel

I would argue that *Public Preparation* can be envisaged as an action research curatorial strategy loosely oscillating around institutions, a strategy with an impact. That strategy involves art institutions through commissions of international scale exhibitions, and simultaneously, operates as a cross-border network-initiated venture, dissolving a centrality of institutions and involving the public through informal and appropriated spaces. *Public Preparation* can be conceptualised as a stage of rethinking how to re-activate the important discourses of politics and arts today.

The newsprint-look exhibition catalogue produced for the *Public Preparation* exhibition in 2010 did not gloss over artistic representations,

instead, it reflected a multilingual art discourse on globalised nationalisms, a discourse that combines the spaces of East and West, featuring texts written in English as well as Russian and Estonian, and also Hungarian for the Budapest version. The texts attempted to respond to what we witness; that is, the increasing sentiments of neo-liberal Capitalist entitlements, the nationality-focused nostalgia of belonging on both sides of the Berlin Wall and the processes of re-writing national myths.

The catalogue for *Public Preparation* has contested the stability of the meanings of key terms associated with the exhibition, with the open invitation for the reader to interpret these ‘given’ definitions and featured a concise *Dictionary of Terms* compiled by Eva Piirimäe (2010). Terms like xenophobia, racism, propaganda, patriotism, Nazism, nationalism, multiculturalism, minority, migration, integration, Fascism, chauvinism etc. evoke particular sentiments that can describe socio-economic and political spaces we occupy geographically and mentally today; spaces that make us, spaces we breathe. *Public Preparation* certainly opened the possibility for more democratic reframing; ‘opening’ up key institutional terms, vocabularies and, subsequently, challenging the reduction of our life to what Foucault termed as bio-politics. Bio-power refers to a technology of power, a way of managing people as a group; it is the practice of modern states and their regulation of their subjects through what Michel Foucault describes as; “an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations” (Foucault, 1976/78, 140).

We require new interlocutors; new platforms that can interpret culture-specific contexts and promote epistemologies across cultural divides, a discourse made of multiple languages to act against the bio-politics stream.

## **Concluding comments**

Over the last decades, parallel with the geo-political changes to the map of Europe, many artists, writers and curators, situated somewhat at a safe distance from institutions, have started to reflect more critically upon the dynamics of border crossing affecting their work and ways of dealing with institutional realms.

We could argue that art institutions are largely ideological organizational forms, supporting a dominant cultural hegemony; their symbolic power is enormous. Art institutions act as economic instruments for adding value to cultural productions. Institutions not only act as art containers but also provide a framework for arts, showcasing and mediating artists’ message.

Yet, institutions are also historical and social constructs, offering various forms of identification. And in today's ever changing environment, institutions keep reinventing themselves, always occupying a position of the privileged in art discourse.

In this chapter, I have discussed the examples of curatorial and artistic practice that claim to work as much as possible outside traditional spatial structures of institutions. For projects such as *Alternativa* or *Public Preparation*, institutional framings need to be continuously renegotiated. Barbara Steiner (2007) reflecting on being part of institutions in the current curatorial context, based on her contribution to the Wyspa Institute-held debate on curating organized in 2005, pointed out:

“it depends on the expectation, on the desire, on the interpretative capacity and – last but not least – on one's own activities, on which role of art and on which kind of institution we really accept or want.” (Steiner, 2007, 21)

How resistant and how critical art production and cultural dissemination can be depends on an individually driven initiative and an individual willingness to negotiate a safe distance from the institutional realm. Negotiating a safe distance can be a tricky territory. A distance from institutions still needs to allow for an institutional proximity in order to be noticed and to be heard.

There is also an idea of an institution that operates by offering a sense of being without a space; it refers to an art institution that acts on nomadic terms, an institution that uses and reuses existing spaces only temporarily, hence, relies heavily on their own established social networks to promote, showcase and debate. Seemingly, amongst many artists, curators and writers, there is now a strong interest in developing new ways of working in conjunction with a public that attempts to blur a distinction between the art and the audiences. Yet, the question is whether art presented in alternative spaces and in the form of alternative models of dissemination can reach a wider audience including the common public, and whether work presented in such spaces can engage an audience beyond highly specialized interest groups, motivated by activism and political action which conversely also involves socialising and being entertained.

Reflecting on arts' new public, David Beech (2010) argues for the art of encounter; capitalising on Nicholas Bourriaud's (2002) ideas associated with relational aesthetics, Claire Bishop's (2012) challenge to political and aesthetic ambitions of participatory arts, and Grant Kester's (2004) contribution to ethics of artistic conduct. It is inevitable that in seeking new ways of engaging the public, in knowledge exchange through art discourse, we need to be mindful of constructing social divisions through

participation, including hierarchies of authorship, responsibility and control. These hierarchies also include geographies of regions and institutional boundaries.

The Diaspora-infused movement that this chapter and several other chapters in this volume address is loosely situated in a feminist critical praxis; a praxis that provides a politically charged platform for investigation, and relies less on the institutions and more on its own networks. Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003) in her reflections on how to decolonise theory through the practice of solidarity argues that in the context of the global economy:

“issues of spatial economy – the manner by which capital utilises particular spaces for differential production and the accumulation of capital, and in this process transforms these spaces and people – gain fundamental importance for feminist analysis.” (p. 2)

In my view, however, feminist politics do not need to be addressed explicitly (as for instance in *Gender Check*), rather, ‘feminisms’ and ‘post-feminisms’ in the examples of the projects and works discussed have become conflated or perhaps appropriated here in the discourses of artists, critics and curators working with the politics of contemporary arts and new media. New curatorial initiatives such as *Public Preparation* or *Alternativa*, I would argue, are covertly dressed in a feminist critique of dominant politics without addressing it by name. Feminist praxis in such projects, via the art production itself, open debate and showcasing practices, form a temporal, politically charged stage for action, and thus, become relevant in terms of deconstructive readings of dominant systems. Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003) introduced the term ‘feminism without borders’, to refer to a trend in questioning socio-political change and social justice across spaces of existing social and economic divisions and various *other* in the context of globalisation and re-iterations of neo-liberal Capitalism. I would argue it is a movement without border and without name, reflecting the dynamics of the Diaspora, in-between zeugmatic position and shifting boundaries of working. Such routes of inquiry also determine how identities are attached (or not) to a place. *Zeugmatic* rhetorically refers to the use of a word to modify or to govern more words when it is appropriate. Serial dislocations, migration mobility and the sense of de-rootedness it creates, metaphorically and materially reflect a movement without border and without name. Such movement is realised through a series of spatial and temporal relocations, not only geographically and institutionally but also conceptually, including the appropriation of ideas, memory, body and sources of Diaspora-routed



inspiration for re-writing history by addressing the current political condition.

Feminist praxis is here situated in the new geopolitical reality of Europe and the historically constructed hegemonic discourses of today. The feminist critique includes here a use of alternative sites of production and presentation (though not *Gender Check* as such) as well as forms of engagement with various degrees of cross-border informal networking platforms that attempt to challenge dominant ideologies. Existing in-between, results in a sense of being outside the conventions of mainstream cultural production. Feminist performance strategies of the 1970s are echoed in these new projects addressing the critique of politics and art production today. The medium of performance that challenged the hierarchy of the arts in the 1970s and its reiterations across the European geographies has become once again an important dimension of re-entering critical debates about gender, inequality and social injustice. For instance, Kathy Battista (2011) salvaging the feminist performance art of the 1970s in London (for 'market sophistication'), has flagged the centrality of domestic space (alongside collective social space) as a site and concern of alternative production. Being outside the mainstream at the fringes of cultural production, yet connected to a discursive circuit spanning the Atlantic, resulted in a type of DIY aesthetics and performative identities. I have also argued (Kosmala, 2011) that a performance of the self becomes in such context the affordable and accessible tool for critique of the current condition.

Contemporary art, when interfacing with politics, can be seen as a comment, a mediation of contemporary social and economic realities in the 'European project' through representation and engagement. I would argue the feminist praxis-based movement without border and without name could be seen as a platform for intervention and a comment in a politics of the everyday, through a resisting agency. However, such artistic strategies are possible when the artists can openly acknowledge their position as marginal, and in a sense, also 'defeated' in the dominant system. Such cultural strategies require, as Chris Townsend (2007) argued sometime ago, a marginal positioning that artists in the West do not accept and, I would add, of which they are not always aware because comparatively artists in the West do not seem to dwell in obvious oppressive conditions or hardship. Over the years, neo-liberal environments have witnessed a gradual decline in socio-public domains such as the church, the community, and the family unit etc., as well as long term political apathy. Simultaneously, we have seen an increase in social 'tolerance' and human rights progress of marginal groups such as less inhibited free speech,

LGBT rallies, legalisation of same sex civil partnerships in the UK for example. Whereas in the post-Socialist European context, art practices that are not neo-liberal and Capitalist-driven can still be seen to have impact whether utopian in principle or driven by necessity, for social and political change in the everyday.

Nancy Fraser's text (2009) published in *New Left Review*, situates the second-wave feminist movement ("not this or that geographical slice of the movement") within the larger political context and its historical moment. She points out that feminist demands for equality have been largely accepted, yet, at the same time, considering the process of feminism's mutation in the evolving realms of neo-liberalism, this acceptance has resulted in a decoupling of feminism's emancipatory potential. I would add that the geographical differentiation and versions of neo-liberalisms and nationalisms further complicate the reference to *the* feminist movement. As such, I would argue for its fragmentary and fluid, spatial and temporal manifestations. Fraser also contemplates the possibility of reorientation of feminism in the present context of the global Capitalist crises, which could lead to a new form of social organising. She states: "With the fragmentation of the feminist critique come the selective incorporation and partial recuperation of some of its stands" (Fraser, 2009, 99).

Maybe, a feminist praxis, without border and without name, may provide a way forward ...a way forward from political apathy, manifested as ever more atomised pretences of *me*-culture, a mode of being-by-consumption and activism propagated by the media spin. Yet, the reality is, as Jan Verwoert (2013) correctly points out that within the art field we maybe are involuntarily avant-garde, finding ways of economic survival. He compares the practical knowledge artists have developed through the centuries in a constant struggle to finding new ways of getting by according to Tony Blair's advice to the everyman: 'Be creative! Self-organize!' (p. 133).

Art is a field of continuous mediation and does not really offer any immediate solutions or answers. Yet, what it does offer is a critical insight into the current condition, a new perspective on the socio-political reality, or an awareness of neglected aspects of the social, economic and political structures. Critical qualities of the visual turn in the projects and works discussed in this volume are located within the paradigm of the visual arts enveloped in what can be termed as a critical feminist stance; a stance that facilitates more deconstructive readings of gender based dynamics at the crossroads, at the border, and reveals how the mechanisms of inequality

can thrive in the context of the current political climate, socio-economic conditions and power of institutions across Europe and beyond.

## Bibliography

- Artel, Rael. 'The Curator's Forward to the Exhibition', *Let's Talk about Nationalism! Between Ideology and Identity* Exhibition Catalogue. Kumu Art Museum, Tallinn, 2010. p. 15.
- Battista, Kathy. 'Performing Feminism', *Art Monthly*, February, 2011.
- Beech, David. 'Don't Look Now! Art after the Viewer and beyond Participation'. In Jeni Walwin (Ed) *Searching for Art's New Publics*, Intellect Press, 2010.
- Bishop, Claire. *Artificial Hells: Participatory Arts and the Politics of Spectatorships*, London, Verso, 2012
- Bojadzijeve, Manuela. 'Migration. Still Speaking about Autonomy'. In Marina Gržinić and Tanja Ostojić (Eds.) *Integration Impossible? The Politics of Migration in the Artwork of Tanja Ostojić*, Argobooks: Berlin, 2009.
- Bourriaud, Nicolas. *Relational Aesthetics*, Les Presses du Reel. 2002.
- Foucault, Michel. *Histoire de la sexualité. I: la Volonté de savoir*. (Paris: Gallimard, 1976). *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1, 'An Introduction'*, trans. R. Hurley. (New York: Pantheon, 1978), In P. Rabinow (Ed.), *The Foucault Reader*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1984.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-79*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008.
- Frazer, Nancy. 'Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History', *New Left Review*, 56, March-April, 2009.
- Gržinić, Marina. 'Global Capitalism and Turbo-Fascism', in Rael Artel (Ed) *Public Preparation. Contemporary Nationalism and Critical Art Practices*, Tallinn, 2010. p. 56.
- Gržinić, Marina. 'De-Coloniality of Knowledge' in Marina Gržinić and Tanja Ostojić (Eds.) *Integration Impossible? The Politics of Migration in the Artwork of Tanja Ostojić*, Argobooks: Berlin, 2009.
- Ivekovic, Rada. 'The Fiction of Gender Constructing the Fiction of Nation: On How Fictions are Normative, and Norms Produce Exceptions' In Blagojevic, Jelisaveta, Kolozova Katerina and Slapsak, Svetlana. (Eds) *Gender and Identity: Theories from and/or on South-Eastern Europe*, Athena, Belgrade: KaktusPrint. 2006.
- Kester, Grant. *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*. University of California Press, 2004.

- Kosmala, Katarzyna. 'Through A Glass Darkly' Performative Practice... Without Border, Without Name' *Variant Magazine*. 41: 48-53. 2011.
- Kosmala, Katarzyna. 'Expanded Cities in Expanded Europe: Resisting Identities, Feminist Politics and their Utopias', *Third Text*, 24(5): 541-555. 2010.
- Labotkin, Eva. 'Reproducing the Nation' in Rael Arte (Eds) *Between Ideology and Identity. Budapest Version*. Exhibition catalogue. Budapest, HTSART, 2011.
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*, Duke University Press: Durham, 2003.
- Mostwin, Danuta. *Trzecia Wartość Wykorzenienie i Tożsamość* [Third Value: Eradicating and Identity]. 2nd ed. Lublin: KUL. 1995.
- Mudure, Mihaela. 'Zeugmatic Spaces; East/Central European Feminisms' in Blagojevic, J. Kolozova K and Slapsak, S. (Eds) *Gender and Identity: Theories from and/or on South-Eastern Europe*. Athena, KaktusPrint, Belgrade 2006. p. 420.
- Muravskaya ,Tanya. In conversation with Rael Artel in *Public Preparation. Contemporary Nationalism and Critical Art Practices*. Rael Artel (Ed) Tallinn, 2010. p. 79.
- Piirimäe, Eva. Dictionary of Terms [EN], *Let's Talk about Nationalism! Between Ideology and Identity*, Exhibition Catalogue. Kumu Art Museum, Tallinn, 2010. p. 77.
- Rajkowska, Joanna. 'Under the Palm Tree', *Public Preparation. Contemporary Nationalism and Critical Art Practices*. Rael Artel (Ed) Tallinn, 2010. p. 24.
- Stallabrass, Julian. *High Art Lite: British Art in the 1990s*. London and New York: Verso. 1999.
- Steiner, Barbara. 'Being Part of' in A Szyłak and A Szczerski (Eds) *The Mousetrap Book On Dealing with Art Institutions in Contemporary Curatorial Practice*. Wyspa Progress Foundation: Gdańsk. 2007.
- Szyłak, Aneta. 'Wyspa as a Fiction, or on the Impossibility of an Island', in A Szyłak and A Szczerski (Eds) *The Mousetrap Book On Dealing with Art Institutions in Contemporary Curatorial Practice*. Wyspa Progress Foundation: Gdańsk. 2007.
- Szyłak Aneta and Ressler Oliver (Eds) *Alternative Economies, Alternative Societies*, Wyspa Institute of Art, Gdańsk. 2007.
- Townsend Chris. 'Protest Art' *Art Monthly*, February, 2007.
- Verwoert, Jan. 'All the Wrong Examples' In Stine Hebert and Anne Szefer Karlsen (Eds) *Self-Organised*, Open Editions, London and Hordaland Art Centre, Bergen, 2013.

Wulffen, Thomas. 'What Happened to...What Happened to the Institutional Critique? Institutional Critique in Retrospect', in A Szyłak and A Szczerski (Eds) *The Mousetrap Book On Dealing with Art Institutions in Contemporary Curatorial Practice*. Wyspa Progress Foundation: Gdańsk. 2007.



## CHAPTER TEN

# FROM FEMINISM TO TRANSFEMINISM: FROM SEXUALLY QUEER TO POLITICALLY QUEER

MARINA GRŽINIĆ AND ANETA STOJNIĆ

### **Introduction**

This chapter examines the passage from feminism to transfeminism in the spaces of the former Eastern Europe during the transition from Socialism to post-Socialism as well as the shift towards what we term as turbo neoliberal Capitalism. The shift from feminism to transfeminism and the role of performative practice have been evaluated in the Western context both historically and in relation to contemporary practice. We argue that similarly we can trace the transformation of feminism from the 1970s towards LGBT activism, and finally, arriving at a queer position in the context of post-Socialist Europe. Despite multiple positions and versions of feminisms, this chapter focuses on this specific genealogy and positions the politically queer at the core of the analysis. We propose to demarcate a historical line of feminist-centered art interventions and activist movements. We can observe the similar processes, events and practices that have paved the way for change in post-Socialist spaces; a re-politicization of a queer movement whereby the sexually queer has been transformed into the politically queer.

This chapter attends to the political power of the passage from feminism towards transfeminism, in relation to performance, video and media art, arising from the practice located at the margin. The politically queer lens offers a genealogy of the multiplicity of feminisms and develops new lines of political struggle, connected with dissident voices within different branches of feminism. This genealogy results in a production of new subjectivity and offers alternatives to traditional ways of doing politics (Preciado, 2004). Transfeminism as a category of

feminism, characterized by the application of transgender discourse to feminist discourse, offers a re-politicization of the movement through diverse voices, beyond gendered binary identifications as well as outside mainstream feminism.

The passage from Socialism toward post-Socialism that ends in global neoliberal turbo Capitalism is examined here in former Yugoslavia. Yugoslavia was a Socialist Communist country, politically different from Socialism of the Eastern Bloc. Paradoxically, former Yugoslavia only became Eastern European in a geo-political sense when the prefix ‘former’ was attributed to it. Post-Socialism had first manifested itself in an explosion of the turbo-nationalism or even turbo-fascism of the war-torn 1990s, in order to be replaced with the turbo-Capitalism of the 2000s. We refer to a notion of turbo-fascism, a term coined by Žarana Papić that describes the violent discriminatory processes of the hegemonic and separatist nationalisms during the Balkan wars, specifically the Serbian militaristic reality of the 1990s:

“It is, of course, known that Fascism is a historical term, and that the history of Nazi Germany is not the same as that of Milošević’s Serbia. However, in post-modernist and feminist theory we speak of shifting concepts, when a new epoch inherits some concepts belonging to an earlier one, like, for instance the feminist notion of shifting patriarchy. In my view, we should not fear to use big terms, if they accurately describe certain political realities”. (Papić, 2002)

According to Papić (2012), turbo-fascism involves a pejorative renaming, strategies aimed at alienation and removal of the other, while it relies on the culture of the normalization of fascism that had been structurally constituted in the society. We use the term turbo-Capitalism to refer to a version of Capitalism that was established in the post-Socialist space of former Yugoslavia, through and after turbo-fascism. In other words, turbo-Capitalism can be viewed as a consequence of turbo-fascism, and at the same time, turbo-fascism can be viewed a means to establish turbo-Capitalism in the first place. In other words, this is an acute example of the intertwinement of nationalism and Capitalism, produced by a relationship between capital and power through the colonial matrix of power. Moreover, we suggest viewing Europe as a whole, and not just Eastern Europe, through the lens of the colonial matrix of power. The colonial matrix of power was articulated by Peruvian theorist Aníbal Quijano (2000) in order to show how the structures of control and hegemony that have emerged during Colonialism can be reproduced at present. The colonial matrix of power consists of a set of technologies of



control, including: control of economy, control of authority, control of gender and sexuality, as well as control of subjectivity and knowledge (Quijano, 2007, 168-187). Unlike the term Colonialism that refers to a specific historical period, the term coloniality is used here to address colonial processes that are in operation today. Contemporary global neoliberal Capitalism is entangled with coloniality. We will analyze the spaces of (Eastern) Europe as an ideological space made up of multiple influences, and in particular, as a meeting point of the Colonialism of the past and the neo-liberalism of the present.

The chapter examines the examples of new media and video art affirming critical thinking, and explores how such works can literally perform in the discourse and practice of art institutions as well as geopolitical and historical contexts. We will investigate the possibility of re-politicizing the border, while at the same time, reflecting on ways the border is formed in the first place. The analysis encompasses the passage from the Cold War to the fall of the Berlin Wall, while seeking to unravel how to understand the Balkan wars in former Yugoslavia. Performance and performativity are places of production of new subjectivities, and hence, as exposed by Preciado, can offer possible alternatives to traditional ways of doing politics.

The genealogy we are proposing will be analyzed by drawing on the works of artists ranging from the 1980s until the present. The discussed examples include: Vlasta Delimar, a Croatian feminist artist active since 1970s; the Slovenian group Borders of Control no. 4's video *Icons of Glamour, Echoes of Death* (1982); Marina Gržinić, Aina Šmid and Zvonka Simčič's video-film *RELATIONS. 25 Years of the Lesbian Group ŠKUC-LL* (2012) that traces the history of the lesbian movement in Ljubljana, and wider, in former Yugoslavia and Europe; Serbian artist Siniša Ilić's performative drawings series *Observing the Trade (Bulk)* (2013); and Bosnia and Herzegovina artists Lana Čmajčanin and Adela Jušić's performative video *I Will Never Talk About War Again* (2011).

### **The politically queer genealogy of performance art**

We refer to the notion of 'queer' not only as an umbrella term to reflect upon marginalized gender and sexual identities, but also as means to research and develop a political platform that can represent these identities. In doing this, we make a reference to Haritaworn, Tauqir and Erdem's text *Gay Imperialism: Gender and Sexuality Discourse in the 'War on Terror'* (2008), in which the authors state that the contemporary analysis of gender discourse should include an imperialist Capitalist white

context of queer positions. Following this line of thought, we argue that 'queer' in its political dimension cannot be seen outside issues of race, class and power relations.

We therefore adopt the perspective of the politically queer when analyzing performative practice in video and new media art in the post-Socialist Europe. We propose a genealogy of contemporary performance in video and new media art that dismantles the singular, established contemporary history of art and performative practice (conceptual, body, and performance) imposed by the former Western Europe-centered historiography. It is a genealogy that takes into account the perspectives of the former Eastern Europe in terms of decoloniality and epistemic delinking from the colonial matrix of power. Our point of departure is philosopher and queer activist Beatriz Preciado's text from 2004, in which she delineates the passage from feminism to gender and queer positions. Preciado (2004) developed an inventory that reflects on the history of performance art in the West in relation to the American history of feminism and queer practice. Preciado introduced three levels of the dramatization of female sexuality that developed from a heterosexual space, evolved to a drag, and finally entered a queer space. We propose a similar genealogy based on Gržinić (2005) that articulates the reading of performing politics in relation to (post)feminism and queer positions in the Eastern European spaces, particularly focusing on the examples from the countries of former Yugoslavia.

Why do we start a genealogy of performance art in the Eastern European context by connecting it with feminism? According to Eleanor Antin, the relationship between performance art and feminist activism is constitutive for performance art: "practically, it was the women of Southern California who invented performance." (cf. Antin in Preciado, 2004).

The Western genealogy of performance as an effect of feminism, according to Antin, has its roots in guerrilla theatre as well as in the university-centered and street riots of the American women's movements of the 1960s and the 1970s. The history of performance, as well as the history of feminism and queer politics, is actually a history of struggle. In contrast to what Antin suggests, in the context of the former Yugoslav territory, performance in connection with feminism has been strongly linked to body art and the conceptual art of the 1970s, the post-conceptual art as well as alternative or underground movements of the 1980s.

It is clear that public space under Socialism 'belonged' to the Communist Party and that it was necessary to find another space, and precisely, to take back the space of contemporary culture. The notion of

performance, therefore, finds its productive meaning, paradoxically, in the area of aesthetics and drag culture in connection with political activism. Preciado (2004) wrote about the dramatization of sexuality as a three-stage process that develops from heterosexual to drag, and eventually enters the queer space. We argue that not only can we outline a similar genealogy of dramatization under Socialism as well as in the post-Socialist context of former Yugoslavia, but even further, we can learn about alterations in the paradigm of queer strategy today.

In the 1970s in Zagreb and Belgrade, there was a dramatization of heterosexual femininity. In the 1980s, within the underground movement in Ljubljana, a dramatization of femininity was performed predominantly in the realms of gay culture. Later, in the 1980s and the 1990s in the post-Socialist context (under the influence of media art and new performance), certain artists reverted to a dramatization of masculinity in the queer context of Eastern Europe. Therefore, the specific genealogy of performance and feminism under Socialism and in the post-Socialist context bridges body art and conceptual art with the underground and punk and rock'n'roll movements, as well as the early video art from the 1980s. This period, we argue, also refers to a transition from sexually queer to politically queer (Gržinić, 2005).

### **The dramatization of heterosexual femininity: Vlasta Delimar**

The beginning of Vlasta Delimar's career can be traced back to the phenomenon of the so-called 'New Artistic Practice' art movement in the 1970s in Croatia. Her artistic productions include performance and installation works, photographic interventions as well as photomontages focusing on a single heroine: Vlasta Delimar herself. Delimar's work bears the gestural imprint of narcissism; she is so utterly centered on herself that she functions at the same time as a sign (a marker in space and time) and as an icon. Over and over again, Delimar staged the internalized projection of her self-centredness. She started, consciously or not, her obsessive self-focus works 35 years ago. Today, being at the centre of attention has become a norm with new media technology and mobile devices.

The notion of the 'heterosexual queer' (Gržinić, 2014), in Delimar's work alludes to the present situation in former Yugoslavia, namely, the proliferation of nation-states. While she posed in front of the photo camera with a cheap, outmoded plastic dildo, she presented a bastard feminist stance - the kitschy one - a stance of queering heterosexual femininity as a response to normalization of patriarchy (Gržinić, 2014). Delimar may in

fact be presenting herself as a housewife and a whore at the same time, yet, her image is at odds with the representation of conventional roles. As such, she is concurrently defiant and submissive in her simulated and excessive sensuality. Delimar stages a displacement of herself (and of the Other); she can be read as an 'image' registering, projecting and subverting the desires and metaphors of contemporary society (Šuvaković, 2006). Her work comments on sexuality in performative terms, which allows us to make a connection with the early works of porn performance artists, such as for instance, Annie Sprinkle in exploiting the kitschy imagery of porn in order to rearticulate, restructure and then, to reclaim the performative position of femininity. This is why the term 'bastard feminist' can be applied to Delimar; she exhibits her naked body (not exactly ideally shaped) and performs herself using a wide range of identity structures, ranging from a housewife (the familiar Socialist worker identity) to a home-made prostitute of some sort (which is actually more similar to 1950s imagery). Along with the plastic dildo, she further intervenes with 'direct speech-acts' through titles such as *I Love Cock* and the like. Her 'shaggy genital' nakedness is also in opposition to 'shaved, non-genital', and therefore, aesthetically tolerated sexuality (Gržinić, 2014).

All the nation-states which formerly constituted Yugoslavia (Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Macedonia, and Kosovo) are characterized by general hostility towards the Roma minority, as well as towards the 'other' in respective hegemonic nationalist spaces. Hence, the target of minority-related attacks in Slovenia is the members of the LGBT community and people from the other republics of former Yugoslavia (known today as the 'erased people'), attacks in Croatia are centred on the LGBT community and the Serbian minority, the attacks in Bosnia and Herzegovina are on the LGBT community and the Bosnians themselves; attacks in Serbia are centered on the LGBT community as well as the Croatian and Albanian minorities (Gržinić, 2014).

In this context, where the nation-states appear homophobic, racist, and chauvinist, Delimar introduces a different strategy. She is a bastard feminist whose identity is proletarian; she is able to perform a subversive role. In 2013, Delimar produced the work entitled: *This is I* (in Croatian: *To sam ja*). It is a photo-negative of Delimar with the captions: *This is I* (Figure 10.1). We can state that this image is not exactly an expression of any true substance. We cannot even identify the image as a representation of Vlasta Delimar herself. Therefore, it is important that the performance transformed to the fictional space both affirms and denies this so-called

evacuation of substance. Such performance seems to attain a form of enunciation. Delimar never ceases to state *This is I*.

Now we can bring to the fore the difference between performativity and performance; the pillars of Delimar's work used to reiterate essentialized identities in order to deconstruct them. Elin Diamond examined links between performativity, performance and subjectivity formation:

“[w]hen performativity materializes itself as performance, in that risky and dangerous negotiation between doing (a reiteration of norms) and a thing done (discursive conventions that frame our interpretations), between somebody's body and the conventions of embodiment, we have access to cultural meanings and critique. Performativity, I would suggest, must be rooted in the materiality and historical density of the performance”. (Diamond, 1996, p. 5)

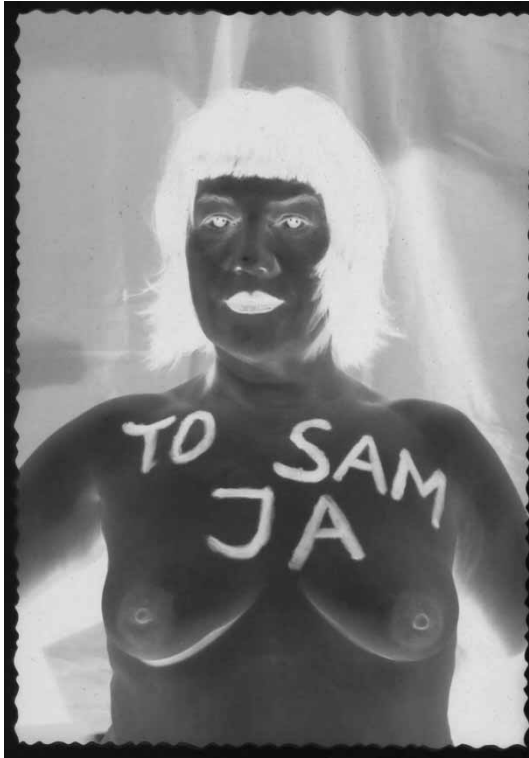


Figure 10.1 Vlasta Delimar, *To sam ja (This is I)*, 2013. Photo negative.  
Courtesy the artist

Patrick Johnson revisited Diamond's argument in *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* (Johnson and Henderson, 2005). He argued that linking performance and performativity does not only produce identity, but also politics of subjectivity. Performance of the self is projected both externally (the outside context) as well as internally (self-reflexivity). Thus, we could argue that the power of Delimar's performance lies in the embodied performativity in terms of gender and enactment of the 'feminine'.

### **The dramatization of femininity in gay culture: Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid**

As opposed to the thriving feminist movement in the West in the 1970s, Eastern Europe feminism came only powerfully to life at certain urban centers, and in former Yugoslavia, in Belgrade and Zagreb. Slovenia had to wait for its feminist coming-out until the 1980s, under the premise of underground music. This happened in Ljubljana through performative actions that can be identified as gay and lesbian, (post)punk and queer.

It is possible, therefore, to establish a different historicization of cultural influences in former Yugoslavia in terms of feminist movements as well as in artistic, social, and critical practice. It was possible to activate feminism within academic and conceptual art structures in Zagreb and Belgrade in the 1970s. In Ljubljana in the 1980s, 'feminism' developed as a theoretical and activist practice only in a connection with other marginalized interventions. In the 1980s, this happened in relation to punk and post-punk movements, as well as in relation to visual culture in the gay community, and through underground alternative music production. Feminist positions in connection with gay and lesbian movements were performed live or through the video camera by the Ljubljana-based groups, such as The Borders of Control no. 4 (Meje kontrole št. 4) or Borghesia. Performances connected with enactments of pornography, sadomasochism, and other marginalized sexual practices, channeled a political message through a video camera.

The performance can create a political space in terms of performativity rather than geo-politics. Hence, our point of departure is not geopolitics. We believe that the debate of East vs. West that has been imposed onto artists of post-Socialist Europe for over 25 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall only proliferates the existence of borders, although in a somewhat depoliticized way. When we refer to the East vs. West division in our analysis, it is to simply acknowledge that division and the border of 'Fortress Europe'.

We argue that performative artistic and political practices do not find their place in the individual body. Such movements have always taken place at the boundaries of the private and the public space. *Icons of Glamour, Echoes of Death* (1982) is the title of the video by the group The Borders of Control no. 4. The video is about the imaginary world of a woman, portrayed as a fashion model, and her friend, an hermaphrodite, performed by Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid (Figure 10.2). The model can be viewed as a 'transvestite', changing gender through the use of language. The model and her friend discuss their childhood stories, their school years, and their first experiences with masturbation. The story unfolds through the confrontation of the model with her photographs. She is playing 'live' for the camera, while restaging her poses in the photographs projected in the background. The model poses against the captions of the song *The Model* by Kraftwerk. The video reuses and applies the aesthetics of German and American avant-garde traditions from the 1960s and the 1970s in its lighting, camera movement, and editing method, referring to Fassbinder, Von Praunheim, and Warhol. The performance in front of the camera points to the politics of sexuality and female pleasure (Wittig, 1982).

It is possible to make a link to another work in the West, to Linda Benglis' notorious advertisement in the November 1974 issue of *Artforum*. She called attention to herself by posing naked with a dildo. In Benglis' advertisement and in the video by The Borders of Control no. 4, the gendered body is made visible through a signifier. We argue that in order to reclaim feminism and its power, it is important to differentiate between heterosexual, lesbian, and queer sexualities, not to hybridize, but to demonstrate the power of these differentiations for feminist critique.

The queer body was, in the East, eminently and thoroughly the political body that presented itself as a move from the sexual towards the politically queer. The outcome of the work from the 1980s is further reflected in the documentary film about the lesbian group *ŠKUC-LL* (1987-2012) by Marina Gržinić Aina Šmid and Zvonka Simčič entitled *Relations* (2012) (Figures 10.3 and 10.4). The video-film offers a historicization of the lesbian movement in former Yugoslavia. The film acts as a testament to a diversity of marginalization processes and follows the struggles of lesbian and LGBTQI communities in Slovenia and former Yugoslavia through late Socialism, the turbo-nationalism of the 1990s, and the normalization of the global neoliberal Capitalism post 2000s.



Figure 10.2 Borders of Control no. 4 *Icons of Glamour, Echoes of Death*, 1982  
Video still. Courtesy the artists

This is not simply a struggle for any kind of visibility of lesbian and LGBTQI movements, but it is rather a demand for historical acknowledgement of visibility, and at the same time, a dismantling of the version of history that excluded it. In this way, this project stands as a struggle for the field of knowledge and delinking from the colonial matrix of power that regulates gender relations and dynamics. As noticed by Kosmala (2013):

“Gržinić and Šmid’s performative practice can also be viewed as a sort of leeway for the enacting of identities. For gender articulation, this artistic strategy also includes female masquerade and performance of sexuality. Their ambivalent performance of identities, at times contradicting one another, is realised through deconstruction, appropriation and narrative critique.” (Kosmala, 2013, p. 65)

This is to say that the format of performance is political as much as aesthetic. The film presents the transition from a sexually queer to a politically queer. The critical discourse of the movement and historical events around it is visualized through interviews with the key figures of the movement, documentation of art projects, networking, socializing and political appearances.





Figure 10.3 and Figure 10.4 Marina Gržinić, Aina Šmid and Zvonka Simčič, *RELATIONS. 25 Years of the Lesbian group ŠKUC-LL*, 2012. Video stills. Courtesy the artists

Drawing upon the historical accounts and the events in the post-Socialist space, the work also exposes the condition of contemporary global Capitalism and gives a harsh critique of discrimination, racism, and fascism in Europe of today. The film comments upon how the violent incidents of Pride Parades in the different republics of former Yugoslavia, around fascist-homophobic attacks, and public discourse around it have changed according to the different political climate in the countries that were entering or preparing to enter the EU at the time (in Belgrade, it is still not possible to organize a Pride Parade). The film also exposes homophobic tendencies in relation to legislation in 2004, when Slovenia became a member of the EU, through discussions and analysis of the local 'climate' that followed the rejection of a new family code which proposed to partially permit same sex couples to gain the same rights as heterosexual families. The family code was rejected through a referendum in March 2012, when the majority decided against same sex unions. It is important to point out that this project was realized independently in the full sense of the word; without any governmental support or without any influence from non-governmental, private or the EU organization or foundation. In this way, it stands as a piece that was created out of a sheer necessity to represent a particular marginalized history by contextualizing the lesbian movement and the LGBTQI community within, and in relation to politics, economics, culture and arts, as well as legal institutional structures. As such, this project stands as a testimony of the political struggle of the lesbian movement in spite of discrimination, of its artistic and cultural potential, critical discourses and emancipatory politics. But even more, it is a testimony to the political power of the transition from feminism to post-feminism, and from post-feminism to transfeminism.

**The dramatization of masculinity in the queer context:  
Siniša Ilić, Lana Čmajčanin and Adela Jušić**

The dramatization of masculinity in the post-Socialist context projected yet another different attitude towards feminism and performance. Seen through a politically queer context in the former East, it is a performative strategy that comments on the ownership(s) of masculinity. This strategy involves questioning the institutional establishments within contemporary art and culture and its (new) proprietary relations. It involves questioning new forms of private ownership of art and culture as the innermost motor of contemporary, global Capitalist, neoliberal societies. Within such a context, it is possible to articulate private property relations, concerning history or intellectual property (copyright for example) as

directly connected to the contemporary institutions of masculinity. Are we not presently witnessing art projects that have several owners who establish the brands, such as for instance *Documenta* in Kassel, the Balkan exhibition series in Germany and Austria in 2003 and 2004 or the exhibition *Gender Check* in 2009 and 2010 produced by the Erste Foundation? A monopoly of neoliberal Capitalist structures and networks of banks, museums, curators' establishments make apparent who is entitled to make decisions. New proprietary relations are established for the protection of Capitalist property rights, leading to an increasingly privatized ownership of different public projects, festivals or art exhibitions (Gržinić, 2005).

A recent series of performative paintings by Belgrade-based artist Siniša Ilić comments on the movement of trade through the abandoned, devastated, uninhabited territories, exposing the back-stage of the global capital movement. These works form two video installations: *Observing the Trade* (2013) and *Inverted House* (in collaboration with Tina Gverović, Tate Modern Project Space, 2014).

The installation *Observing the Trade* consists of a video projection with a purpose-built auditorium (Figures 10.5 and 10.6). The auditorium suggests a performative relation with the audience, emphasizing the passivity of the observer. The reality of the global age (Gržinić, 2008) corresponds to the reality of globalization as a total process that creates a network of interdependent functional relations that simultaneously connect de-territorialization and re-territorialization. This is the context of a global era in which Capitalism equals reality.

The explosion of capital, the accumulation of goods as well as the (critique of) consumerism and contemporary global civilization built upon debt and spending are usually presented through imagery of highly populated megalopolises, high technology performance, overcrowded shopping zones, etc. In contrast to this kind of representation, Ilić's series takes us into the wasteland that functions as a backdrop for processes behind the curtain of trade and production that normally remain hidden. Devastation and emptiness are depicted in unspectacular, yet striking ways. The object of desire, a commodity, is replaced with its counterpart, emptiness created by exploitative processes. Through the division of labour and territories certain groups are brought to the level of a bare life and made to live on the brink of death; a manifestation of life regulated by necropolitics (Mbembe, 2003; Stojnić, 2013). Necropolitics (term conceptualized by Achille Mbembe, in 2003) emphasizes the governmentality of death under global Capitalism and the transformation of the regulation of life within the extreme conditions of the war machine (after 2001), produced by contemporary Capitalism.

The form of Capitalism that he alludes to is referred to as necrocapitalism. Necrocapitalism presents contemporary forms of organizational accumulation that involve dispossession and the subjugation of life to the power of death (Mbembe, 2003; Gržinić, 2012).



Figure 10.5 Siniša Ilić, *Observing the Trade (Bulk)*, 2013. Installation view.  
Courtesy the artist

It is important to emphasize that we are not referring to geographical but to geo-political and economic divisions that can be present within the same territories. Such processes are often represented in a spectacular manner through art production (which is yet another commodity) that creates the condition of apparent obviousness. It is this situation in which reality is covered with obviousness that Santiago López Petit (Gržinić,

2012) calls gelatinization. It is precisely this process of gelatinization through which Capitalism is being equated as the only possible reality. No matter how problematic and exploitative its processes are, it is still perceived as the ‘only game in town’. The challenges for artistic practice that aims at critical thinking are associated with ways of addressing these issues without repeating the gesture of reproduction of Capitalist spectacular imagery. Ilić’s drawings that we see on the projected screen in *Observing the Trade (Bulk)* are far from being spectacular. Created in simple reductive and expressionist form, these drawings function almost as pictograms, or as signs that are re-signifying the signified. In a disturbing way, the known but overlooked mechanisms that govern the world are re-exposed and channeled to spectators, or as the title suggests to ‘observers’, offering a possibility to rethink their own passivity through a more active participation.



Figure 10.6 Siniša Ilić, *Observing the Trade (Bulk)*, 2013. Installation view.  
Courtesy the artist

In the video performance *I Will Never Talk About War Again* (2011) by Lana Čmajčanin and Adela Jušić (Figures 10.7 and 10.8), the artists put forward the female voice in the discourse about war. As they explain:

“In this performance we are trying to expose all possible emotions about the fact that we speak about war, but also to point out different aspects of referring to the war, for example, how nationalistic parties use constant reminders of the war in the media.” (Jušić/Čmajčanin, 2011)

The video performance consists of two women in an emotionally charged dialogue in which both utter one single sentence: “I will never talk about war again”. In the post-war context, this repetition exemplifies the paradox of the discourse on war. It is not about whether to talk, but questioning who can talk and how war is talked about. In other words, the artists are re-claiming the power of war’s narrative by refusing to refer to it. The power over narrative is the power over identity; the power over the fundamental ways in which society seeks evidence of what its core values are. Narrative (of a specific historical account) becomes a space in which social power is negotiated, where it is challenged, denied or confirmed. By reclaiming narratives (which are necessarily ideological in the context of the present times), the possibility of their re-politicization is opened up. This is why dominant narratives and histories call to be critically re-examined and reconstructed anew.

Overreaching the local context and personal experience of war and post-war context, this work looks at Europe and its neo-colonial relations within it, which came with the introduction of global neoliberal Capitalism into the post-Socialist space. Transition from Socialism to post-Socialism in this context happened through the violent process of war (imposed by the political and military elites) that worked with the transformation of bio-politics (mode of the governmentality of life) into necropolitics as in other parts of former Yugoslavia and former Eastern Europe widely (for instance in Chechnya in Russia). The war in this video work is contextualized further by the biographies of the authors who are from Bosnia. However, not being named in the piece, ‘the war’ at the same time stands as a metaphor for the global war machine. If we examine the context of the institutions of contemporary art and culture (that is part of the global system of Capital), we can see how certain debates of war, politics, economy, gender, or border get appropriated, turned into surplus and in such a way become depoliticized. We could argue that *I will never talk about war again* in the context of the institutions of contemporary art means: I resist appropriation, Capitalization, financialization and branding of war discourse.



Figure 10.7 and Figure 10.8 Lana Čmajčanin and Adela Jušić  
*I Will Never Talk About War Again*, 2011. Video performance stills.  
Courtesy the artists

## Conclusions

In this chapter, we attempted to engage with a conceptualization of the dramatization through art practice in order to politically rethink performance and video art that critically re-examines the post-Socialist European context, in terms of genealogies and histories of the transition from a sexually queer to a politically queer position.

The political power of the passage from feminism towards transfeminism was analyzed across the dramatization of heterosexual femininity in the works of Delimar, the dramatization of femininity in gay culture in the video by *The Borders of Control* no. 4, and historically rearticulated in the overview of the gay and lesbian movement in Slovenia and former Yugoslavia until today, in the video-film *Relations. 25 years of the lesbian group LL* (2012) by Gržinič, Šmid and Simčič. The passage from Socialism towards post-Socialism that ended in global neoliberal turbo Capitalism was addressed through the analysis of works by Ilić, Čmajčanin and Jušič, and connected to the dramatization of masculinity in the queer context, questioning the institutions of contemporary art and culture and its (new) proprietary relations in society.

Why the reference to performance and performativity? Insisting on the politically queer moment, the sexual and performative elements are important because gender and sexuality are the key benchmarks for neoliberal global Capitalist democracy while the political space becomes disentangled from racism, class-based inequalities and other forms of discrimination as well as Capitalist dispossession. The Western European democracies now claim women's equality and gay rights as symbols of their neo-liberal Capitalist civilizations. Gender and sexuality as such are becoming benchmarks of the mainstream politics and risk being depoliticized, or simply to say bleached.

In her book *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (2007), Jasbir Puar has developed the term homo-nationalism in order to articulate the processes in which liberal politics incorporate certain queer subjects into the fold of the nation-state. Heteronormative ideologies that the nation-states have long relied on are now accompanied by homo-normative ideologies that seem to replicate narrowly defined racial, class, gender, and national ideals.

Puar argues that in this way queer positions which (via the AIDS epidemic in particular) had been construed as figures of death, and we would add, as subjects of necro-politics, were shifted to subjects tied to ideas of life and productivity such as gay marriage and reproductive kinship, are now reintroduced into the field of bio-politics. Puar contends



that this exclusive inclusion of some specific queer subjects depends on the production of the concept of Orientalized terrorist bodies (Puar, 2007). While her analysis is focused on the present processes unfolding in the USA, we can observe the similar situation in Europe, in the former West as much as in the former East. This was, among others, famously addressed by Judith Butler in her speech on the occasion of her rejection of the *Civil Courage Prize* awarded by Berlin Pride in 2010, when she stated:

“I must distance myself from complicity with racism, including anti-Muslim racism. We have recognized that lesbian, gay, trans, queer people, can be used by warmongers involved in cultural wars against immigrants. [...] Actually many European governments are stating that our lesbian, gay, queer freedom should be protected and we should be held to believe that the new hate against immigrants is necessary to protect ourselves”. (Butler, 2010)

In *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (1993), Butler constructed the theory of gender by examining the power of heterosexual hegemony at the most ‘material’ dimensions of sex and sexuality. Body as the site of performativity was conceptualized as being connected with opening possibilities for the deconstruction of gender binaries. Butler extended the power of discourse construed as performativity with the questions of race, including yet another domain of a body, and referring to those (bodies) that do not matter in the same way. We could notice that something similar is reflected in the relation of the former West of Europe towards the former East. We argue that the politically queer ontology of our lives includes forgotten history, as well as the struggles against discrimination and racialization, while forming the new ways of representing and articulating art.

## Bibliography

- Butler, Judith. ‘I Must Distance Myself From This Complicity with Racism, Including Anti-Muslim Racism’, *Civil Courage Prize Refusal Speech*, Christopher Street Day, June 19, 2010. Accessed 29 June, 2014. <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/judith-butler/articles/i-must-distance-myself/>
- . *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* Routledge: New York. 1993
- Diamond, Elin. ‘Introduction’. In Diamond Elin (Ed) *Performance and Cultural Politics*, Routledge: New York, 1996.

- Gržinić, Marina. 'Vlasta Delimar', *VLASTA DELIMAR: This is I*, Exhibition catalogue, Zagreb: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2014.
- . 'Biopolitics and Necropolitics in Relation to the Lacanian Four Discourses', *Art and Research: Shared Methodologies. Politics and Translation*, Barcelona: Academy of Fine Arts, 2012.
- . 'Subjectivization, Biopolitics and Necropolitics: Where Do We Stand?', *Reartikulacija*, 6, Ljubljana, 2008.
- . 'Performativity and Processuality', *Inventory: Dance and Performance Congress, Live Act, Intervention*, Tanzquartier: Vienna, 2005.
- Haritaworn, Jin, Tauqir, Tamsila and Erdem, Esra. 'Gay Imperialism: Gender and Sexuality Discourse in the "War on Terror"'. In Kuntsman, Adi and Miyake, Esperanza (Eds.) *Out of Place: Interrogating Silences in Queerness/Racality*, York: Raw Nerve Books, 2008, pp. 71-95.
- Johnson, Patrick and Henderson, Mae (Eds.) *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2005.
- Jušić, Adela and Čmajčanin, Lana. 'I Will Never Talk About War Again', Artists statement, <http://adelajusic.wordpress.com/works/i-will-never-talk-about-the-war-again/>
- Kosmala, Katarzyna. 'Constructed Stories of (Non)Belonging to Europe: Performative Videos of Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid', *Art Inquiry*, 15(24): 65-88, 2013.
- Mbembe, Achille. 'Necropolitics', *Public Culture* 15(1), Durham: Duke University, 2003.
- Preciado, Beatriz. 'Pharmaco-Pornographic Capitalism Postporn Politics and the Decolonization of Sexual Representations', In The Editorial Group for Writing Insurgent Genealogies (Eds.) *Utopia of Alliances, Conditions of Impossibilities and the Vocabulary of Decoloniality*, Translated by Marina Gržinić, Vienna: Löcker, 2013, pp. 245-255.
- . 'Gender and Performance Art: Three Episodes from a Feminist Queer Trans Cybermanga...', *Zehar* 54, San Sebastian: Arteleku, 2004.
- Papić, Žarana. 'Europe after 1989: Ethnic Wars, the Fascismation of Social Life and Body Politics in Serbia', *Filozofski vestnik, Special Issue The Body*, Marina Gržinić (Ed), Ljubljana: Institute of Philosophy ZRC SAZU: 191-205, 2002.
- Puar, Jasbir. *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, Duke University Press, 2007.
- Quijano, Aníbal. 'Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality', *Cultural Studies*, 21 (2-3): 168-178, 2007.
- . 'The Coloniality of Power and Social Classification', *Journal of World Systems* 6:2 (Summer/Fall): 342-386, 2000.
- Stojnić, Aneta. 'Decoloniality of New Media Technology', In The

- Editorial Group for Writing Insurgent Genealogies (Eds.) *Utopia of Alliances, Conditions of Impossibilities and the Vocabulary of Decoloniality*, Vienna: Löcker, 2013, pp. 260-266
- Šuvaković, Miško. 'Studije slučaja - Diskurzivna analiza izvođenja identiteta u umetničkim praksama' [Case Studies, Discursive Analysis of Performing Identities in Artistic Practices], Pančevo: Mali Nemo, 2006.
- Wittig, Monique. 'The Category of Sex', *Feminist Issues* 2:2(Fall): 63-68, 1982.



## CONTRIBUTORS

**Katy Deepwell**, PhD is Professor of Contemporary Art, Theory and Criticism at the Art and Design Faculty, Middlesex University. She founded *n.paradoxa: international feminist art journal* and KT press in 1998 (online in 1996), [www.ktpress.co.uk](http://www.ktpress.co.uk). Six of the articles from *n.paradoxa* about women artists from Central and Eastern Europe were included in the *Gender Check Reader* (2009) as well as other essays by several of the contributors to this volume, including: Gržinić, Kosmala, Rossa and Nedkova. Her books include: *Women Artists Between the Two World Wars: 'A Fair Field and No Favour'* (Manchester University Press, 2010); *Dialogues: Women Artists from Ireland* (London: IB Tauris, 2005); *Ten Decades: The Careers of Ten Women Artists born 1897 - 1906*, Exhibition Catalogue of Arts Council Touring Exhibition, Norwich Gallery, NIAD, April 1992. She edited: *Women Artists and Modernism* (Manchester University Press, June, 1998); *Art Criticism and Africa* (Saffron Books, July 1997); and *New Feminist Art Criticism: Critical Strategies* (Manchester University Press, 1995). She also co-edited: *The Gender, Theory and Art Anthology: 1970-2000* (with Mila Bredikhina) (Moscow: Rosspen Publishing House, 2005). Lives in London.

**Inga Fonar Cocos** is an artist. She graduated from the Faculty of the Arts, Tel Aviv University and is a former Chairman and co-founder of the Israeli Professional Artists Organization. She was a Lecturer at Kalisher School of Arts, Tel-Aviv, Israel. She has exhibited her works internationally including: National Museum Poznan, Mediations Biennale, Poland; Ashdod Museum of Art, Israel; Ein-Harod Art Museum, Israel; Janco Dada Museum, Ein Hod, Israel; Ben-Gurion University Art Gallery, Israel; The Prozna Project, Singer Festival, Warsaw, Poland; Artneuland, Berlin; Gallery of the Cité Internationale des Arts, Paris; Württembergischer Kunstvere, Stuttgart; World Summit, Johannesburg. She has received several awards for her works. Currently lives and works in Tel Aviv, Israel.

**Mark Gisbourne**, PhD is a curator and a writer. He was a Lecturer at Slade School of Art, University College, University of London, and Senior Lecturer at Sotheby's Institute. He obtained his Doctorate at Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London and is a former Treasurer and President of the British Art Critics Association. He co-organised the World Congress of Art Critics, Tate Modern in 2000. Recent Visiting Professorships include the University of Sassari, Italy and the Alvar Aalto University, Helsinki. He wrote more than a dozen books and nearly three hundred catalogue texts, published variously in over twenty languages. For the last ten years, he has curated the international exhibition Rohkunstbau in Brandenburg (the last being Rohkunstbau XIX 'Moral', 2013). Currently, he is involved in a series of exhibition projects with German artists in Zagreb and Berlin. His latest books in English/German and English/Spanish include: *ERZGEBURTSTAG "ERZKUNST"* (Kerber Verlag, Berlin, 2013), *Paule Hammer* (Kerber Verlag, Berlin, 2013), *Markus Keibel* (Berlin, Distanz Verlag, 2013), *Adrian Ghenie* (Berlin, London and New York, Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2014), *Bosco Sodi* (2014, Mexico City and New York), *Anne Wolff 'Persona' Glass Sculpture* (Arnoldsche Art Publishers, Stuttgart, 2014). His most recent international touring exhibition with a catalogue was *I am a Berliner: Eighteen Positions in Berlin Painting* (Zagreb, Kunsthalle of the Artist Association, 2012; Helena Rubenstein Pavilion, Tel Aviv Museum; Sassari Modern and Contemporary Museum, Sardinia, 2013). Lives and works in Berlin.

**Marina Gržinić**, PhD is a philosopher, an artist, Research Advisor at the Institute of Philosophy at the Scientific Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Science and Art (ZRC-SAZU), Ljubljana, Slovenia, and Professor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, Austria. She published several books in Slovenian, French, and English, including: *Fiction Reconstructed: Eastern Europe, Post-Socialism & the Retro-avant-garde*. (Vienna: Selene, 2000); *Situated Contemporary Art Practices: Art, Theory and Activism from (the East of) Europe*. Ljubljana: ZRC Publishing; Frankfurt am Main, Revolver Archiv für aktuelle Kunst, 2004); *Une Fiction Reconstituée: Europe de l'Est, Post-Socialisme et Rétro-avant-garde* (Ouverture Philosophique) (Paris, Budapest, Torino: Harmattan, 2005); *Re-Politicizing Art, Theory, Representation and New Media Technology*, (Schriften der Akademie der bildenden Künste Vienna. 2008). She has been involved with video art since 1982. In collaboration with Aina Šmid, she has realized more than 40 video art projects. Gržinić and Šmid have presented and exhibited their works in more than 100 video festivals and events across the globe, including: World Wide Video

Festival, Den Haag; European Media Art Festival, Osnabruck; Muu Media Festival, Helsinki; Grand Prix Video Danse, Paris; International Video and TV Festival, Montbeliard; London Film Festival; Stuttgart Film Festival; Oberhausen International Short Film Festival; Kassel Documentary Video Festival; Caixa, Mediateque, Barcelona; and others. They have received several awards for their video productions. Gržinić currently lives and works in Ljubljana, Slovenia and Vienna, Austria.

**Beata Hock**, PhD is Research Associate at the Leipzig Centre for the History and Culture of East Central Europe and a curator. She has authored *Gendered Creative Options and Social Voices: Politics, Cinema, and the Visual Arts in State-Socialist and Post-Socialist Hungary* (Stuttgart, 2013) and *Nemtan és pablikart: Lehetséges értelmezési szempontok az utóbbi másfél évtized két művészeti irányzatához [Women's Art and Public Art: Possible Interpretive Aspects for Two Kinds of Art Practice Emerging in the Past 15 Years]* (Budapest: Praesens Books, 2005). Recent curatorial projects have included Róza El-Hassan's retrospective (Műcsarnok/Kunsthalle Budapest, 2006), the international group show *¼ Hungarian* (Institute of Contemporary Art, Dunaújváros and Liget Gallery, Budapest, 2007) and *Agents & Provocateurs: The Critical Potential of Oppositional Art Practices* (Institute of Contemporary Art, Dunaújváros, 2009 and The Hartware Medien Kunst Verein, Dortmund, 2010). Currently researches processes of the politicisation and de-politicisation of art and the iconic figure of the artist in a Socialist world.

**Katarzyna Kosmala [EDITOR]**, PhD is Professor of Culture, Media and Visual Arts at the University of the West of Scotland, Visiting Research Fellow at the European Institute of Gender Studies GEXcel at Linköping University and Örebro University, Sweden, an art writer and a curator. She was Visiting Professor at Fundacao Getulio Vargas in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. She writes regularly about video and new media art in international journals and catalogues. Her new book *Imagining Masculinities: Spatial and Temporal Representation and Visual Culture* (2013, Routledge) through a European perspective and applying an international lens, investigates representations of men and masculinities in contemporary culture, and examples of visual art that deconstruct those representations. Recently co-edited *Art Inquiry on Crossing Borders: Imaging Europe, Representing Periphery* (with Ryszard Kluszczyński) (Łódzkie Towarzystwo Naukowe, 2013) and currently working on the book *The Arts, Social & Organisational Change: Precarious Spaces* (Intellect Press). In 2012, she curated *Intermediality of Image and Politics*, a major survey of 30 years of

video work collaboration by Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid (Centre for Contemporary Arts CSW Łaznia Gdańsk, Poland and CCA, Glasgow). Lives and works in Edinburgh, Scotland.

**Pawel Leszkowicz**, PhD is an art historian, a curator and Research Fellow in the School of Humanities, University of Brighton. He was Lecturer at Adam Mickiewicz University, the Fine Arts Academy in Poznan, Poland and a Marie Curie Research Fellow in the Centre for the Study of Sexual Dissidence at the University of Sussex, UK. He has published widely on contemporary art and queer issues in Polish, German, Austrian, Hungarian, Spanish and English in journals, catalogues and edited collections. His books are: *Helen Chadwick. Ikona grafia podmiotowości* [*Helen Chadwick: The Iconography of Subjectivity*] (Kraków, 2001), *Miłość i demokracja. Refleksje o kwestii homoseksualnej w Polsce* [*Love and Democracy: Reflections on the Homosexual Question in Poland*] co-authored with Tomek Kitlinski (Kraków, 2005), *Art Pride: Gay Art from Poland* (Warsaw, 2010), *The Naked Man: The Male Nude in post-1945 Polish Art* (2012). His curatorial work has included: *Miłość i Demokracja* [*Love and Democracy*] (Poznań, 2005, Gdańsk, 2006), *Imperium zmysłów* [*The Empire of the Senses*] (Poznań, 2007), *Vogue* (Gdańsk, 2009), *Urban Legend* (Poznań, 2009), *Ars Homo Erotica* at Warsaw's National Museum (2010), *Love is Love. Art as LGBTQ Activism: from Britain to Belarus* (2011), and *Civil Partnerships: Feminist and Queer Art and Activism in the UK* (2012), co-curated with Lara Perry.

**Iliyana Nedkova** is a curator and founding Director of ARC: Art Research Communication – a curatorial practice working internationally with artists, exhibitions, art fairs, editions and critical context since 2004. She holds an MPhil in Curating Contemporary Art from Liverpool John Moores University. Currently, she is the Creative Director at Horsecross, Perth and a research curator at Centre for Contemporary Art, Glasgow. Previously worked for New Media Scotland; Stills, Edinburgh; FACT, Liverpool and Soros Centre for the Arts, Sofia. Latest curatorial projects include the international symposium of curating new media Art Place Technology, Liverpool and ARC Projects – the first international gallery for contemporary art in Sofia established in 2007. She also served as Honorary Cultural Attaché at the Consulate of the Republic of Bulgaria in Scotland.



**Agata Rogoś** is a curator and Research Fellow at the University Eqrem Cabej, Gjirokastra, Albania. She currently researches ethno-nationalism, identity and political myths of Macedonian and Albanian nations for her PhD in Balkan studies, at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland. She collaborated and worked with the following institutions: Baltic Sea Cultural Centre, Gdańsk; Zamek Cultural Centre, Poznań; Academy of Fine Arts, Gdańsk; Leto Gallery, Warsaw; University of Arts, Poznań; ZAK|BRANICKA Gallery, Berlin. She published among others in *Architektura*, *Architektura & Biznes*, *Praesens*, *Arteon*, *Obieg*, *Exit*, *Czas Kultury*. Since 2012, she has been an IKT member (International Association of Curators of Contemporary Art). Currently lives and works in Poznań, Poland and Skopje, Macedonia.

**Boryana Rossa**, PhD is an artist and a curator. Her practice merges electronic arts, film, video, performance and photography. She lectures at Syracuse University Department of Transmedia. In 2012, she obtained Doctorate in electronic arts at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Troy, New York. Her work has been shown internationally including: steirischer herbst, Graz; National Gallery of Fine Arts, Sofia; Balkan Biennale, Thessaloniki; Kunstwerke, Berlin; Moscow Biennial; Brooklyn Museum, New York; Exit Art, New York; Museum of Contemporary Art, Vienna, Zacheta Gallery, Warsaw; Coreana Museum, Seoul. In 2004, she co-founded, with Russian artist and filmmaker Oleg Mavromatti, the UTRAFUTURO art collective, engaged with issues of technology, science and its social impact. UTRAFUTURO works have been shown at the Biennial for Electronic Art, Perth; FACT, Liverpool; Society for Art and Technology, Montreal. Her curatorial project Corpus Extremus (Life+) at Exit Art, New York in 2009 focused on art and biology. She was the 2008 recipient of the *Essential Reading for Art Writers* award of the Institute of Contemporary Art, Sofia. She is also a curator of Sofia Queer Forum, 2012. Lives and works in New York and Sofia, Bulgaria.

**Aneta Stojnić**, PhD is an artist, a curator and Research Fellow at S:PAM, the Research Centre for Studies in Performing Arts & Media, at Ghent University, Belgium. She obtained her Doctorate at the University of Arts in Belgrade. In 2013, she was a Visiting Scholar at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. In 2012, she was a writer in residence at KulturKontakt, and in 2011, an artist in residence in Tanzquartier, Vienna, Austria. She published on contemporary art and media, as well as artistic and curatorial projects in journals such as: *IDENTITIES. Journal for Gender, Politics and Culture*; *ProFemina, Journal for Women's Literature and Culture*;

*AM, Journal for Art and Media Studies; Kultura – Journal for Theory and Sociology of Culture and Cultural Policy.* She collaborated with cultural institutions and organizations such as: Tanzquartier, Vienna; Open Systems, Vienna; Les Laboratoires d'Aubervillier, Paris; Quartier21 MQ, Vienna; Dansens Hus, Stockholm; Odin Teatret, Holstebro; BITEF Theatre, Belgrade; TkH Walking Theory, October Salon, Belgrade; Pančevo Biennale, Pančevo. Currently lives and works in Ghent, Belgium and Belgrade, Serbia.

**Josip Zanki** is an artist and Associate Professor at the Education Department, University of Zadar, Croatia. He graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Zagreb in 1994. Since 2007, he is President of the Croatian Artists Association. His research interests include the influence of mythology on the contemporary visual art in Western Balkans. Together with ethnologist Mirijana Trošelj he published a book *Mirila* (2012). Selected group exhibition includes: Superdownload Mittelfest, Cividale, 2002; Digging the Channel-Mobius Centre for Experimental Art, Boston, 2002; Cairo biennale, 2008; Osmosis, Halle 14 Spinneri, Leipzig, 2012. Selected individual exhibitions includes: Museum of Eastern and Western Art, Odessa, 1998; Galeria Neon, Bologna, 2001; Studio Tomaseo, Trieste, 2001; Galerija Rigo, Novigrad, 2010. He received numerous prizes for his work and is currently working on his PhD in Cultural Anthropology at the University of Zagreb on Tibetan thangka painting in Dharamsala and its connections with Pythagorean geometry. Lives and works in Zagreb and Zadar, Croatia.