

Performing practice: Gržinić and Šmid's narration of (non)belonging to Europe

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Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid play out the decentred position of the subject in representations of being European, Balkan, Slovenian, ex-Yugoslavian, queer, female artists. Gržinić and Šmid are Slovenian video artists working collaboratively since 1982. Beginning in the underground music scene of former Yugoslavia, combining punk movement with performance art, they have collaborated in more than 40 video art projects, films and numerous video and media installations; directed several video documentaries and television productions. The ironic gesture of their acting enhances critically informed performances of different forms of subjection. This ambivalent performance of identities, at times in contradiction with one another, is realised through deconstruction, appropriation and narrative critique. Working collaboratively for thirty years now, using the medium of video, the artists position memories of a Communist past and its symbolism with the contradictions of post-Socialist conditions, and in doing so engage in a critique of hegemony of the West and global capitalism.

In video and new media art in particular, the abstract quality of a technologically generated and mediated world becomes an expressive means of communication strategy in the region. Enacting can be envisaged as a sort of a leeway for enacting identities, their memories and histories. For gender identification this also includes female masquerade, performativity of sexual and other identities. Performativity relates here to performance in cultural and artistic material practices of posing, representing and identifying with the identities and their forms, advocated by media deconstruction.

In *Naked Freedom* (2010), one of more recent videos by Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid, in collaboration with Zvonka Simčič, the artists conceptualise the possibility of social change under the conditions of financial capitalism and commercialisation processes that permeate art, social, political and critical discourse today. The work also comments on the process of making. The collective process is about simultaneous enactment of social, political, and performative practices: it is a collective venture performance for the screen that aims "to resonate with performers off screen". The work connects Ljubljana, Belgrade, and Durham/USA and presents a conceptual political space of engagement that allows for rethinking the meaning of local and the conditions for membership into the contemporary communities of practice, in particular, who is to be left out, what is the price to be paid.

Seven young activists, musicians, poets, and youth workers, members of the Youth Centre Medvode, have met in a village (Medvode) near Ljubljana to discuss capitalism, colonialism, education, and the power of art as a possibility for a political intervention. There are utopian allusions in rethinking the possibility for a radicalization of what can be termed a 'proper life', citing the work of Jonathan Beller, Achille Mbembe, Gilles Deleuze and others:

Achille Mbembe:

<< What connects terror, death, and freedom is an ecstatic notion of temporality and politics.>>

One of the performers recites Jonathan Beller :

<<It is cinema, as culmination of industrial technologies that uses the visual to re-organize the sensory world for the State and market.>>

The work attends to the questions of idealism vis-à-vis the power of youth, as well as initiating a participatory practice through the making of the video via which social relations are sealed, revealing visible agency ready to ask for new possibilities.

Belgrade-based artist and performer Siniša Ilić deconstructs violence (from heteronormative to nationalistic forms of violence) in his performative drawings that connect different spaces within the realm of culture, art and activism. The drawings depict violence in a grotesque manner, disclosing brutalities as result of nationalist homophobic tendencies against the trans-gendered positions.

The last section of the video addresses the question of border control and the status of those seen as non-EU, non-citizens in Europe. More specifically, the status of African nations in 'Fortress Europe' is addressed through migrant workers trying to live and survive in the European Union today. A historical analysis is offered of the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion and prevention of work and life in the EU, based on a debate-exchange between Marina Gržinić and Ghana-born and Amsterdam-based Kwame Nimako that took place at the 'Workshop on Education, Development, Freedom', at Duke University, Durham, USA, in February 2010. The workshop was organised by the Center for Global Studies and the Humanities director, Argentinean literary theorist, Walter D. Mignolo, to explore concepts such as global coloniality and the geopolitics of knowledge production. Kwame Nimako runs the National Institute for the Study of Dutch Slavery and its Legacy in Amsterdam. Here the video becomes a kind of docu-fiction, or a *dispositif* for a film, addressing the wider context of global capitalism and labour migration with the aim of confronting the working and living conditions of non-EU residents in particular from the African continent. A history of these relations vis-à-vis the new geopolitical reality of Europe is narrated, history based on the established hegemonic mechanisms of division that are the outcome of past colonialism, today 'forgotten' but lived and reproduced steadily through Western European food policies' divisions of the World.

Through tactics of resistance, which introduce the concept of emancipation and alternative voices in artistic practice, political alliances with those seen as 'outsiders' emerge. *Naked Freedom*'s structure constructs what Gržinić has called a revolutionary *dispositif* – a project for a possible change, for a different society, different politics and different place of art in neoliberal global capitalism.

In an interview with Ana Vujanović, Gržinić explained: "Our videos are so condensed, almost viscid and heavy, since each frame in the video relates to the production of life and to politics, and only then to art. What we are primarily researching and seeking to express is bio-politics, that hybrid of the biological and the political, the power that organizes not only bodies in contemporary societies but also, to an extreme degree, the conditions of life and politics"¹. Gržinić's message is that one (here the fe/male artist from the East) is made possible or exists solely on the basis of the subversive performance of various identity-

¹ Marina Gržinić in conversation with Ana Vujanović. In Gržinić M and Velagić T (Eds) *New Media Technology, Science and Politics: The Video Art of Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid*, (Locker: Vienna, 2008).

roles and its mis-representation: “There is no difference between my writing, my video, my lectures at the art academy in Vienna: they all are part of the same painstaking, almost bureaucratic work of insisting on constant differentiation and contamination. Everything I do is patiently constructed genealogy of power and dirty relations, the bloody situations of art and politics...There will never be an end to art because too much money is invested in contemporary art productions and also because art today has signed a clear and visibly normalized contract with capital” (Gržinić in conversation with Ana Vujanović)².

Post-Communist re-birth of patriarchy has stimulated gender tensions and is particularly visible in the socially and culturally conditioned reality of transformation and negotiation of ‘our European’ space. The disappearance of Communist paradigms of Socialism and its accompanying rhetoric of ‘equality’ have been replaced with the ‘new’ return of a traditional female signifier. The female body once appropriated by the Communist Party as a symbol in ideological struggle has re-entered conservative political discourse as integral to the nuclear family. This historical appropriation and its importance in the productivity of a nation is perpetuated today. The ambiguous position of belonging to and being on the periphery of Europe (marginal places of influence in cultural discourse) further complicates identity construction.

Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid have been working with a critique of ideologies portrayed as the fluid, changing systems, revealing their rhetorical functions in cultural production. Ideology is manifested in the body, history, and culture. Their collaborative practice point at resisting tactics in contemporary art ; they evoke that emancipation and alternative voices in artistic practice can only emerge parallel with processes of reflecting who the ‘outsiders’ are in the context of post-Socialist mapping of non-capitalist world. The video *Postsocialism + Retroavantgarda + IRWIN* (1997), points towards aesthetics’ regime in which the video itself becomes a medium for a philosophical reflection about the cultural, artistic and political spaces in the current conditions of post-Socialism in territories of ex-Yugoslavia in the 1980s and 1990s. IRWIN group, Mladen Stilinović and Kasimir Malevich feature in the video. Their artistic projects with their relation to the Socialist and post-Socialist ideology code in a specific way the ex-Yugoslavia geographical space. As a result of this coding, *Retroavantgarda* emerges; an attempt to frame newly constructed art-retroformation through technology. Slavoj Žižek and Peter Weibel are also being heard. Utopian alternative mapping of non-capitalist world, as Gržinić and Šmid presented in *Postsocialism + Retroavantgarda + IRWIN*, doesn’t seem to be all inclusive either. Not all artists can be included in such post-Socialist mapping, especially those artists who are purposefully a-theoretical anti-academic and involved in philistine movements. Also, there is a problem of inclusion with regard to more emerging artists. Thus, it seems that different forms of hierarchies may occur in this utopian mapping as presented by Gržinić and Šmid.

The notions of nation, heritage, religion and state that hold significant positions in the processes of refashioning the former Eastern European countries are put under scrutiny. What becomes evident through such notions is the legitimisation of patriarchy as the socio-economic, political and symbolic order. Consequences of renewed patriarchy are often taken for granted, in particular the existence of social exclusion and gender inequality. On a parallel level, socio-economic ‘progress’ and EU membership are seen as being significantly ‘wanted’ in the Central and Eastern European region where the significant proportion of the

² *Ibid.*

population experience a worsening living standard, in large as a result of amplified changes³. Instances of violence, aggressive parental authority and female victimisation are all grafted onto poverty and low living standards⁴. This can be extended further and seen reflected in the problems associated with mass migratory movements of cheap labour and in the boom of sex trafficking from East to West in our Fortress Europe.

As the post-Communist legal and political systems have become increasingly masculinised, and gender relations more dichotomised through consumption and a culture of spectacle, alternative social and cultural movements seem once again stifled. Deconstruction of cultural and visual identities is important not only in dismantling the patriarchal mechanism behind nationalism but also in reflecting on the processes of undoing inequalities and exclusion by dominant systems and their accompanying discourse.

Gržinić and Šmid through a “contaminating working strategy”, merging spaces, institutions, the inside and the outside and thinking in terms of different economies and different institutional *dispositifs* in which one is situated, works and lives, question ownership, for instance, the ownership of histories, including feminist histories. I loosely draw on bell hooks’ notion of a feminist movement, advanced in *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (2000), constructing a narrative around visual representations embedded in action and proposing to merge a kind of restless criticality with a social consciousness. Such method incorporates an element of self-criticality, including reflection on positioning, on class, race, gender, sexuality and so on. In addition to giving an inclusive approach to gender representation and its geographies, this is a self-reflexive way of de-centering, contesting and problematising the ongoing ideological constructions of global subjectivity more generally.

Nancy Frazer’s ‘Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History’ (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 geographical differentiation and versions of neo-liberalisms and nationalisms further complicate the reference to *the* feminist movement. As such, I would argue for fragmentary and fluid spatial and temporal manifestations of multiple feminisms. Fraser also contemplates the possibility of reorientation of feminism in the present context of 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”⁵.

I would argue that the performative movement without border and without name could be seen as a platform for reflection on critical art practice or as a comment or intervention in a politics of the everyday, through a formation of a resisting agency.

³ There is still a large area across the region occupied by rural communities, many living on a sustainable economy, at times deficient with regard to the modern contemporary living standards and education. Rada Iveković, ‘The Fiction of Gender Constructing the Fiction of Nation: On How Fictions are Normative, and Norms Produce Exceptions’, in Blagojevic, J. Kolozova K and Slapsak, S. (Eds) *Gender and Identity: Theories from and/or on South-Eastern Europe* (Athena, KaktusPrint, Belgrade 2006).

⁴ *Ibid*

⁵ Nancy Frazer, ‘Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History’, *New Left Review*, 56, March-April, 2009, p 99

However, such artistic strategies are possible when the artists can openly acknowledge their position as marginal and ‘defeated’ in the dominant system, admit a sense of non-belonging. Such cultural strategies require, as Chris Townsend (2007) argues, a marginal positioning that professional Western artists do not accept and, I would add, of which they are not always aware⁶. Such practices that are not capitalism-driven can become a means and a metaphor, however utopian or real, for social and political change in the post-Socialist reality of the everyday. Yet, artistic utopias found at this intersection and their resisting identities remain invisible to once called ‘Western’ audiences.

Gržinić and Šmid’s video *HI-RES* (2006) critiques power of the market that dominates the art world. The dominant art market position determines the written texts, production of critical works and also the international curatorial practices. The dominant market also determines the language of cultural productions. In the video, the contemporary dance performance serves as a metaphoric background for a dense narrative analysis of the global capitalist system and its ‘performative’ politics. A debate is carried out on the premises of a garden, in a typical middle-class house on the outskirts of Ljubljana. The questions arise about the condition of the geo-political location for limits of art production and representation in the new European spaces. Art in post-Soviet countries become amalgamated with a monster; becomes a part of the capitalist machinery.

Although post-Socialist art practice is becoming increasingly integrated into a capitalist system, Central and Eastern European artistic perspectives have something different to communicate. Its creativeness is less a specific repertoire of particular art forms and more a series of idiosyncratic, aesthetic strategies and local applications of already familiar forms (echoes of transgressive gestures, the utopian promise of the avant-garde, play with subversive techniques of performance/technology). Socio-economic and cultural identity construction processes are constituted by an interesting hybrid of ideological domination, resistance, and socio-economic and cultural (meta)change, particularly in the 1990s, a decade which saw the art status of CEE redefined in a globalised (arts) market while nevertheless appealing to what constitutes ‘our reality’. The discourse of belonging to ‘new Europe’ now forms a powerful locus of a management of meanings by which (g)local culture is maintained and transmitted and the exploitative nature of capitalism is nevertheless criticised while local politics are challenged. Such a position can result in certain way of seeing, drawing on Ingmar Bergman’s *Through a Glass Darkly*, a way of seeing that challenges reduction of core values that make us⁷.

To conclude, we could argue that identification processes are tied to their regions, represented through historical issues and the framings of political events. These processes can be expanded to culturally conditioned, socio-political practices and their geographies. Gržinić and Šmid’s narration of (non)belonging to post-Socialist spaces, manifested as a sense of fragmented, resisting, ambivalent and performative micro-hi/stories, reveal both the dynamics of political criticism and subversive positions. The intersecting histories and cultures, shared traumas, and recent geo-political conditions within post-Socialist Europe, are all embedded in the artists’ collaborative practice.

⁶ Chris Townsend ‘Protest Art’ Art Monthly, February 2007

⁷ Parts of this text were published in Variant Magazine in 2011. Katarzyna Kosmala ‘Through A Glass Darkly’: Performative Practice... Without Border, Without Name’, Variant Magazine, 41, Spring, 2011.

Short Bibliographies:

Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid are Slovenian video artists working collaboratively since 1982. Beginning in the underground music scene of former Yugoslavia, combining punk movement with performance art, they have collaborated in more than 40 video art projects, films and numerous video and media installations; directed several video documentaries and television productions. They have presented and exhibited their works in more than 100 video festivals and events across the globe and have received several major awards for their video productions. From 2010 Gržinić and Šmid started to work in collaboration with **Zvonka Simčič**, multimedia artists and producer. Simčič is a founder of the CCC Institute, Slovenia, established in 2001.

<http://www.grzinic-smid.si/>

<http://www.zavod-ccc.org/index.php?page/GS/>

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