

Through A Glass Darkly: Performative Practice... Without Border, Without Name

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Introduction

The socio-economic and ideological transformation of Central and Eastern Europe has accelerated the processes of re-writing 'identity' scripts in the region. A new performative turn can now be observed in art production, theory advancement and curatorial initiatives – an approach which involves geographies of shifting borders and appears to coalesce around a feminist critique of dominant politics without addressing it by name. I would argue that such initiatives enact what sociologist Chandra Mohanty refers to as "feminism without borders"¹, a politically charged network-based movement raising social justice issues positioned in relation to globalisation and neo-liberalism.

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. Narratives of 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.²

I want to introduce and reflect on art practice broadly enveloped in the Central and Eastern European feminist tactics of today. The intersecting histories and cultures, shared traumas, and recent geo-political conditions within post-Socialist Europe, are embedded in these artists' cultural practices. By discussing the instances of cultural strategies purposefully located at the tensions between institutional spaces and independent production, my reflections will focus on the Diaspora-infused artistic strategies engaged in cultural forms of representation.

I set out to explore cultural tactics situated in the neo-liberal context of today that point to alternative modes of instituting and relating to society, individuals and institutions. These practices appear to afford illusionary hopes to those areas that are disempowered locally by the inertia effects of global capitalism, and yet also allow for distance to be maintained from such 'utopian' pursuits. Accordingly, the questions emerge as to whether feminist-infused critiques can become part of broader histories and social and political struggles, and whether feminist histories transgress the market game concerns and celebrity *art-lite* of international biennials? Addressing these questions, let us 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 recuperation by the capitalist institution.

Embedding Diasporas

The consolidation of the global financial crisis as well as reframing of the socio-political and economic 'transition' from post-Socialism in European spaces have led to the emergence of a critical political discourse in contemporary art practice, a re-mobilisation of feminist politics and the re-writing of histories. At the same time, extensive migration across the border of 'Fortress Europe' has fuelled nationalistic rhetoric and placed a rewriting of neo-liberal sentiments on both sides, East and the West, firmly on the agenda. Against the backdrop of the global financial crisis, public cuts, governmental initiatives supporting EU-policy led private

enterprises and ever more precarious nature of employment and social security, questions are raised regarding the future forms of governance and community empowerment.

I recently responded to a petition in support of colleagues I closely work with at University of Glasgow to save modern languages/cultures courses from closure. Subsequently, I have been asked to join colleagues in protesting against the proposed cuts through media appeals. Such moves to cut the arts and social sciences, mirrored at other UK Universities, certainly weaken the claims of education to serve the wider community in a globalised world where linguistic and cultural competence is supposed to help build bridges across various forms of cultural divide. The Treaties of Rome were signed more than fifty years ago and subsequently the multi-lingual European Union born. More recent EU 'acquisitions' are not necessarily of post-war Western European origin. I have in mind the Central and Eastern European countries. Their continuing social and cultural invisibility in the European project highlights the problematic situation in the (re)emergence of a European cultural identity. This problem concerns a scarcity of common histories and memories in the search for tangible links between West and East. It is timely to acknowledge other histories of 'our Europe' that include wider cultural and political spaces and transcend 'translation'-based frictions. Despite the on-going protests, despite initiatives such as the plea of Jonathan Bate³, which details the contribution of the arts and humanities to the value and quality of life, we witness serious threats to the future of education and cultural life in the UK and beyond. I also wonder, what kind of message does it send to those who entered UK academia and art practice from elsewhere, like myself?

Artists, writers and curators from the European Diaspora who often live and work in zeugmatic spaces that can be perceived simultaneously as a home and abroad, have contributed to a revival of politically engaged critical voice, evident from recent theory advancement and curatorial initiatives of the geographies and art scenes of Central and Eastern Europe. As European democratic rhetoric within the global corporate capitalist frame establishes its prominence across political, social and cultural spaces – witness the UK coalition government flagship policy aims of its *Big Society* – critically infused art discourse can form a commentary on contemporary events, such as the 'European project', and can offer a way of intervening in rewriting history. It thus has the potential to form a movement of resistance and protest, a mechanism to initiate change or evoke an alternative voice.

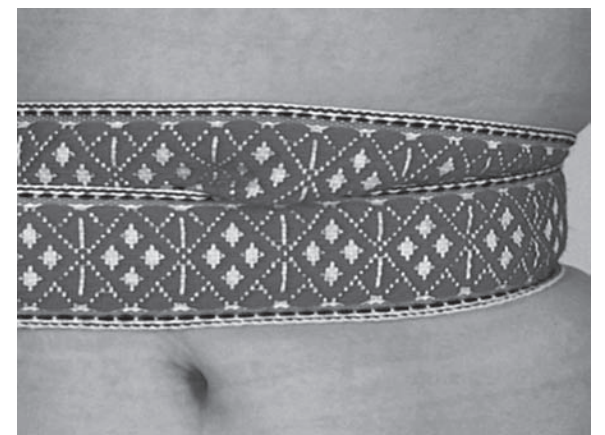
For instance, some artists enact docu-fictions which expose the identity politics inherent within media rhetoric, such as the video works of Tallinn-based artist Eva Labotkin's *Woman in the Field* (2007) and *Belt* (2010). Politicising the video medium, the artist comments on the ideological constructions of '(mother)land' in today's politics. The relationship with one's place is demarcated by giving birth to the land, woman's role in a production of national ideals and sentiments in relation to one's belonging and political discourse on re-territorialisation of the new nation, its new dreams in new Europe. Other forms of representation on reproducing nationhood are addressed by Belgrade-born and Rotterdam-based Katarina Zdjelar's video *Don't Do it Wrong!* (2007). On a typical morning in a

Turkish primary school life the *Independence March* national anthem is first heard. This is followed by a children's collective pledge to "I devote my existence to being a gift to the Turkish existence". Zdjelar comments on the role of state institutions in creating "appropriate citizens of the nation" and their bio-power in daily life. Warsaw-based Joanna Rajkowska project *Airways* (2008) is a video-proposal for a project on the contemporary Hungarian nation. She creates the possibility for an ideal speech moment by inviting 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 sexual minorities. Together, they fly over Budapest together in a small tourist plane, "an attempt to reformulate basic human relations, where suddenly what is instinctive and physical influences the political, obviously as an illusionary moment"⁴.

Top:
Belt (2010),
video still,
Eva Labotkin

Middle:
Don't Do It Wrong! (2007),
video still,
Katarina Zdjelar

Bottom:
Airways (2008),
video still,
Joanna
Rajkowska



But why are such artistic voices necessary? After all, art production is now complicit and closely integrated with global capitalism, both economically and socially, and is largely subservient to that system. Echoes of alternative cultural forms of production, that appear once more to be coveted, can be found in the more or less Marxist-inspired social activism of the first half of the twentieth 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 twentieth century⁵. But in searching for alternative voices in this cultural turn, beyond cynical play with neo-liberal rhetoric, there is a need to assess the elements of its resistance to dominant capitalist logic. Although it is commonly agreed that art has become assimilated into corporate capitalist systems of (re)production and consumption, contested spaces of struggle for voices other than those of neo-liberal individualism, inflated celebrity culture and consumerism, remain.

Neo-liberal policy is now repositioned as a multiplication of the enterprise forms within the social body. Foucault's bio-politics can be located at the centre of the policy agenda: "It is a matter of making the market, competition, and so the enterprise, into what could be called the formative power of society"⁶. The *Big Society* discourse can be seen as cynically attempting to 'dignify' the cuts agenda via the language of reinvigorating civic society. New neo-liberal rhetoric of the *Big Bank* for the *Big Society* operates here as a re-organisation of the state, emblematic of Foucault's notion of bio-politics which sees the state under the supervision of the market⁷. Indeed, Benjamin Noys argues that the 'grammar' of neo-liberalism continues to dominate our thinking, defining 'us' as those resistant to neo-liberalism as a specific form of governmental rationality, and more generally to capitalism as a 'social form'⁸.

Transitions of and in this 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' world, and associated with constructed or assumed shifting identities. Current experiences in the identity arena reveal an increase in dominant nationalistic discourses in which every form of minorities' rights are marginalized, including women's voices and alternative discourses of civil movements that appear 'tamed' both in the East and the West.

Ongoing re-framings of current socio-political conditions have resulted in cultural projects which question more directly the current political climate and dominant ideologies across Europe. Such projects benefited from being less driven by institutional framings, notably the initiatives led by Rael Artel's *Public Preparation* (2007-ongoing), Anata Szylak's *Alternativa* in Wyspa Institute of Art in Gdańsk (2010-12) or Maria Hlavajova's *Former West* (2008-13). *Public Preparation*, a programme of workshops, meetings, publications and exhibitions co-ordinated in the forests of Estonia, on the outskirts of Tallinn, investigates issues of nationalism and contemporary arts in Europe in the format of international knowledge exchange. *Alternativa* initiative consists of a series of international exhibitions, art events, publications and on-line activities aimed to investigate the ways in which contemporary arts intersect with the political. 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 now a post-industrial space in an on-going regeneration battle, *Alternativa* addresses the recent histories of collective political movements, testing its possibilities, its failures⁹ ("all the dirt put under the carpet"). *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. Attending to the so-called 'block' mentality and 'post-block' futures against the backdrop of neo-liberal capitalist realms, *Former West* is co-ordinated at the Basis Voor Actuele Kunst, in Utrecht.

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(s) in Central and Eastern European art resulted in *Gender Check*. Showcased in Vienna, Austria in 2009, and then in Warsaw, Poland in 2010 and 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 geographies of Eastern Europe. The research, the exhibition, and a symposium have looked at both official and unofficial 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 the project has asked include: 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 discuss how social and cultural developments as well as political ideologies affected the construction of gender identities in visual arts produced before and after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and although the references to nationalism and national constructions feature strongly, they are not critically addressed. Interestingly, these politically charged, cross-border projects have been led by women, and further, each representing different degrees of assimilation with the European Diaspora trends.

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

I would argue that ontological framings in emergent Diaspora-infused cultural strategies, involving geographies of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), interface at the junction of critical political voicing, performativity and local feminist histories. A performative turn in artistic strategies tied to critical practice has its roots in the underground and neo-avant-garde movements of the second half of the twentieth century, offering a productive perspective on the complexity of identity representation in new Europe. Artists such as Eva Labotkin and Katarina Zdjelar operate in *zones of insignificance*, a psycho-geographical space that encourages critical thinking; the artistic tactics they chose to adopt are situated at some distance from the market and dominant discourses.

Feminism in the CEE has its particular characteristics: historically infused apotheosis of a private space and a preference for 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 (Stalinist versions of Communism in the 1970s and 1980s and corporate global capitalism now).

Communism created a divide between private and public spheres. Whilst in the West 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 or on a 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, it was a terrain for the contestation of the Socialist paradigm of womanhood. The feminist root in the alternative art practices of resisting imposed identities in Central Europe today derives from this historical divide between signifying context of the 'private' and the 'public'. Mihaela Mudure 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. In discussing the link between Communism and feminism, she seems to identify the source of oppression: while Communism relied on the category of class, feminisms rely on the category of gender¹⁰.

A 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.

The notions of national identity, religion and state hold more significant positions in the processes of refashioning the new confrontations which belonging to Europe brings. What becomes evident through such claims 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 has seen a significant proportion of the Central and Eastern European population experiencing a worsening living standard as a result of amplified change¹¹. Instances of violence, aggressive parental authority and female victimisation are all grafted onto poverty and low living standards¹². This can be extended further and seen reflected in the problems associated with mass migratory movements of cheap labour and the boom in sex trafficking 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.

Performing

The medium of performance that challenged the hierarchy of the arts in the 1970s, and its reiterations across European geographies has become once again an important dimension of reentering into critical debates about gender, inequality and social injustice. Bringing performativity to the feminist critique includes 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 challenging dominant ideologies. A transitory state of oscillation between mimicking and assimilating, negotiating another shift in a state of political consciousness, another performative move.

This performative turn appears as a central strategy adopted in emergent initiatives of knowledge exchange and new curatorial initiatives such as *Public Preparation* or *Alternativa*. Such projects, I would argue, are covertly dressed in a feminist critique of dominant politics without addressing it by name. Chandra Mohanty 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 capitalism¹³. I would also add, it is performing without border and without name, reflecting the in-between zeugmatic position and shifting boundaries of seeing through in-betweens. Such routes of inquiry also determine how identities are attached, or not, to place.

Zeugmatic in rhetoric 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 derootedness it creates, metaphorically and materially reflect a performing movement without border and without name. Such movement is realised through a series of spatial and temporal relocations, not only geographically but also conceptually, including migration and the appropriation of ideas, memory, body and sources of Diaspora-routed inspiration for re-writing history through addressing the current political condition.

Performing feminism, without border and indeed without name, is here situated in the new geopolitical reality of Europe and the historically constructed hegemonic discourses of today. Being 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. For instance, Kathy Battista¹⁴ salvaging feminist performance art in 1970s 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. It is a performance of the self that becomes the affordable and accessible tool for critique of current condition.

Discussing the examples that follow, I loosely draw on bell hooks' notion of a feminist movement, advanced in *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (2000), constructing narrative around visual representation embedded in action and merging a kind of restless criticality with a social consciousness. Such method incorporates an element of self-criticality, including reflection on my positioning, class, race – as a writer – and on yours – as a reader. 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 Fraser'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 its fragmentary and fluid spatial and temporal manifestations. 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"¹⁵.

I would argue, the performative movement without border and without name could be seen as a platform for reflection on art practice as a comment or intervention 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 'defeated' in the dominant system. 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 aware¹⁶. 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 Western audiences. This is certainly the case here in Scotland, and the UK more widely, where I live and from where I work.

Looking... Through A Glass Darkly: Naked Freedom

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 still the exploitative nature of capitalism 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 us.

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. 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 over twenty years 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 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 that 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), the most recent video by Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid at the time of writing, 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, 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 Center Medvode, have met in a village near Ljubljana to discuss capitalism, colonialism, education, and the power of art as a possibility for a political intervention. There are utopian allusions to 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 >>

Après Jonatan Beller (one of the performing students):

<<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 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 her performative drawings, a connector between different spaces within the realm of culture, art and activism. The drawings represent violence in a grotesque manner, opening up what is gender violence to wider systemic framings.

The last section of the video addresses the question of border control and the status of non-EU citizens status 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 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, one based on the established hegemonic mechanisms of division that are today 'forgotten' but their traces lived through the European food policies.

Through a tactics of resistance, in a relational sense (Kester, Bourriaud), which introduces the concept of emancipation and alternative voices in artistic practice, integration with other outsiders necessarily emerges. *Naked Freedom's* structure constructs what Gržinić has called a revolutionary *dispositif* – a project for possible change, for a different society, different politics and different

Naked Freedom
[*Čista svoboda*]
(2010),
video stills,
Marina Gržinić
and Aina Šmid

place of art in political space.

In an interview with Ana Vujanovic, 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”¹⁷. 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-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 Vujanovic)¹⁸.

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 *depositifs* in which one is situated, works and lives, question ownership, for instance, the ownership of histories, including feminist histories.

Seeing/Noticing

As the crisis in our ‘Fortress Europe’ unfolds, the next step is to motivate collective action, as Charles Esche in his essay ‘Imagine Resistance’ in *Public Preparation* (2010) argues, mobilizing the artistic perspective in imagining the world differently, offering the opportunity to change our immediate environments.

Public Preparation, is a curatorial project enveloped in participatory strategy. It was established in 2007 in order to address issues associated with current socio-economic and political conditions across Europe, in particular the rise of various versions of nationalisms and state-appropriated collective memory ‘boom’. 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 from 2007 to 2010 resulting in a contextual framing with the international exhibition *Lets Talk about Nationalism! Between Ideology and Identity*, which opened February 2010 in Tallinn at Kumu Art Museum.

The overarching theme for the *Public Preparation* debate is indeed a concern around growing nationalisms in Eastern Europe (and in the West) and questions about its relation to contemporary arts. Rich comparative perspectives on the construction of nationalism that emerged 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-to-be perspectives such as Turkey, Russia and Israel. Rael explains that over several years of her curatorial practice the majority of the participants represented the geographies of former Central Eastern Europe: “My aim has never been to organize a kind of ‘Olympic Games’ with an equal representation for all nations – vice versa – the selection of the participants has been closely connected to the practice of these people, what they do and how they think”¹⁹.

Since the Berlin Wall was torn down and the Soviet Union collapsed, a mushrooming of revived democracies has been witnessed across Eastern Europe. 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. Over the years, *Public Preparation* materialised in five seminars including several critical presentations and reflective debates on the current condition in the arts and politics, two publications and the international exhibition 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 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 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”²⁰. Łódź-based Iza Desperak talked about the problematic of hate as an escape in relation to frustration with capitalism. Copenhagen-based Jens Haaning talked about the possibilities and impossibilities of revolution addressing questions of consumption.



Rael 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 has led to the discussions that are now topical in Estonia as well as in other parts of former Eastern Europe and beyond.

The choice of spaces is critical for such projects. The Wyspa Institute of Art in Gdansk 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. Oliver Ressler’s *Alternative Economies, Alternative Societies* project, initiated in Ljubljana in 2003, and closely linked with the Wyspa’s framing as oscillating between alternative space and fictional art institution, offers insights into peripheral theories and localised art practices, social and economic forms of organisation the projects such as *Alternative* or *Public Preparation* also explore. The book-catalogue published following the *Health and Safety* exhibition at the Wyspa *Alternative Economies, Alternative Societies*²¹ features the text-transcripts of video installation narratives, including among others: Chaia Heller talking about libertarian municipalism; Takis Fotopoulos addressing inclusive democracy; Michael Albert on participatory economics; Paul Cockdhott reflecting on the possibilities of new Socialism; Marge Piercy on feminist

utopias; Rafał Burnicki discussing anarchist consensual democracy; Maria Mies on the notion of subsistence; Nancy Folbre advocating caring labour; Christopher Spehr on free co-operation; and texts historically framing workers’ collectives in places such as former-Yugoslavia (Todor Kuljic), Spain (Salome Molto) and France (Alain Delotel). These are ‘minor’ voices, yet, voices that aim at broadening perspectives on various other social and economic forms of organisation and art production today.



From Tallinn to Gdańsk and back, *Public Preparation* has accumulated into the international exhibition *Let’s Talk about Nationalism! Between Ideology and Identity*, showcased at the Kumu Art Museum in Tallinn, Estonia in 2010. 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) refers to conflicts arising in association with processes of commemorating the past in public spaces and the re-writing of histories through treatment of their material signifiers. 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”²².

The works in the exhibition were displayed according to three key themes: ideological habits, reproduction of a nation, and conflicts. In addressing the latter, Budapest-based artist Csaba Nemes uses painting as a medium to portray crime locations associated with the racist murders of Roma people by a group of right-wing fanatics in Hungary: “The only thing we see are rural houses”, as in the work *Yellow House* (2009). 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 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]”, argues the curator, Rael Artel, in the exhibition catalogue, “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”²³. The conceptual installation work with explicit political content, by Copenhagen-based artist Jens Haaning, *Eesti* (2010) consists of a white cube space with the monumental black text *EESTI*, which means Estonia in Estonian.

For me personally, *Public Preparation* acts as an action research curatorial strategy with an impact. A strategy that involves art institutions through commissions of international scale exhibitions and simultaneously operates as a cross-border

Above:
Monuments (2008), installation, Tanja Muravskaja; *Light Breeze* (2009), *The Yellow House*, (2009), *The Last House* (2009), *In Front of the Maize Field* (2009), Csaba Nemes.

Left:
Erden Kosova (Istanbul) at the ‘Symptoms of Nationalism and Critique of Nationalism in the Practice of Contemporary Art’ in Pärnu, July 2008.



Left:
Eesti (Estonia) (2010), mural
installation, Jens Haaning.

network-initiated venture involving the public through informal and appropriated spaces. *Public Preparation* is in a stage of rethinking how to reactivate the important discourses of politics and arts today, currently being exposed in Budapest.

Evoking

The newsprint-look exhibition catalogue did not gloss over artistic representations, instead it reflected a multilingual art discourse on globalised nationalisms, a discourse that combines spaces of the East and the West, featuring texts written in English as well as Russian and Estonian. The texts attempted to respond to what we witness; that is, the mushrooming of sentiments of neo-liberal capitalist entitlement and the nationality-focused nostalgia of belonging on both sides of the once Berlin Wall.

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. Included in the concise *Dictionary of Terms*²⁴ are:

- A-Assimilation
- C-Chauvinism
- E-Ethnic group, ethnicity
- F-Fascism
- I-Identity
- I-Ideology
- I-Integration
- M-Migration
- M-Minority
- M-Multiculturalism
- N-Nation
- N-National rights
- N-Nationalism
- N-Nation-state
- N-Nazism
- P-Patriotism
- P-Propaganda
- R-Racism
- X-Xenophobia

The given definitions demarcate the socio-economic and political spaces we occupy geographically and mentally; spaces that make us, spaces we breathe, less or more consciously. *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*²⁵.

We require new interlocutors; skills that allow us to translate and work across cultural divides

and multiple languages to act against the biopolitics stream. I certainly include myself as part of this collective project of Diaspora, a movement that also encompasses spaces of, as John Berger referred to²⁶, "the countless personal choices, encounters, illuminations, sacrifices, new desires, grief and finally, memories...which are, in the strictest sense, incidental to the movement". Incidental yet important, opening up possibilities for shaping new heteronomies.

Un-categorising

A Diaspora-infused movement of a more performative nature, loosely situated in feminist praxis (without addressing it by name), provides a politically charged platform of investigation. Feminist politics don't need to appear explicit (as for instance it did in *Gender Check*), rather, 'feminisms' and 'post-feminisms' 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.

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. In *Searching for Art's New Publics* (2010)²⁷, David Beech argues for the art of encounter; capitalising on Bourriaud's relational aesthetics, Bishop's antagonisms and participatory art objects, and Kester's ethics of artistic conduct. 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. Further, there is a risk of re-appropriation, such as the UK's latest sound-bite of the *Big Society*²⁸. Lord Nat Wei, a social entrepreneur who currently advises the coalition Government on aspects of taking forward the *Big Society* agenda and driving implementation, has recently contacted Rael with regard to *Public Preparation*...

If the next step is to motivate collective action, the task for artists, writers and cultural workers should not be to defend what we have – a socially divided neo-liberal system, of which a capitalist driven hierarchical 'art' is a part, and an unfolding global corporate capitalism. As Slavoj Žižek graphically illustrated in reference to his book *Violence*, democratically narrating it on Youtube²⁹: "Is not our consumerist society one big Gulag?"³⁰ The game that global capitalism allows us to play today cannot go on forever. What we need, instead, is to affirm what art might be; a challenging, bold, provocative and seductive alternative to the status quo. In a way, I would argue, a feminist perspective in a form of performative movement, without border and without name, may provide a way forward ...to wake us up from political apathy, manifested as ever more atomised pretences of *me*-culture and a mode of being-by-consumption; *jouissance* and enchantments of entrepreneurial spirit and activism propagated by heteronormativity and media spin.

To A. M. and all those on the other side.

Notes

1. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Duke University Press: Durham, 2003)
2. Katarzyna Kosmala, 'Expanded Cities in Expanded Europe: Resisting Identities, Feminist Politics and their Utopias', *Third Text*, 24(5): 541-555. 2010.
3. Jonathan Bate (Ed) *The Public Value of the Humanities* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2011) opens up one of key debates aimed to maintain support for education and the role of the arts and humanities in cultural life.
4. Joanna Rajkowska, 'Under the Palm Tree', *Public Preparation. Contemporary Nationalism and Critical Art Practices*. Rael Artel (Ed) (Tallinn, 2010). p. 24.
5. Katarzyna Kosmala, 2010 pp. 542-543.
6. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-79*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008). p. 148.

7. Michel Foucault, *ibid*.
8. Benjamin Noys, 'The Grammar of Neoliberalism', Accelerationism Workshop, Goldsmiths: London (14 September 2010).
9. See http://criticalpracticechelsea.org/wiki/index.php?title=Alternativa_meeting_in_Gdansk_-_December_2010
10. Mihaela Mudure '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. See also Katarzyna Kosmala 2010 p. 545.
11. http://www.panix.com/~lnp3/faq/uneven_development.htm
12. *Ibid*. 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. (Iveković, 2006)
13. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 2003.
14. Kathy Battista, 'Performing Feminism', *Art Monthly*, February, 2011.
15. Nancy Frazer, 'Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History', *New Left Review*, 56, March-April, 2009, p 99
16. Chris Townsend 'Protest Art' *Art Monthly*, February 2007
17. Marina Gržinić in conversation with Ana Vulcanovic. In Gržinić M and Velagic T (Eds) *New Media Technology, Science and Politics: The Video Art of Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid*, (Locker: Vienna, 2008).
18. *Ibid*.
19. Rael Artel in a virtual interview with me. 19-20 February 2011.
20. Marina Gržinić, 'Global Capitalism and Turbo-Fascism', *Public Preparation. Contemporary Nationalism and Critical Art Practices*, Rael Artel (Ed) (Tallinn, 2010). p. 56.
21. Aneta Szyłak and Oliver Ressler (Eds) *Alternative Economies, Alternative Societies* (Wyspa Institute of Art, Gdańsk 2007)
22. Tanya Muravskaya in conversation with Rael Artel in *Public Preparation. Contemporary Nationalism and Critical Art Practices*. Rael Artel (Ed) (Tallinn, 2010). p. 79.
23. Rael Artel, 'The Curator's Forward to the Exhibition', Let's Talk about Nationalism! Between Ideology and Identity Exhibition Catalogue. Kumu Art Museum, Tallin, 2010. p. 15.
24. Eva Piirimäe, Dictionary of Terms [EN], *Let's Talk about Nationalism! Between Ideology and Identity*, Exhibition Catalogue. Kumu Art Museum, Tallin, 2010. p. 77.
25. *Bio-power*: a technology of power, a way of managing people as a group; the practice of modern states and their regulation of their subjects through "an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations." (p.140) *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).
26. John Berger, *Hold Everything Dear. Dispatches on Survival and Resistance*, (Verso: London, 2007). p. 2
27. Jeni Walwin (Ed) *Searching for Art's New Publics*, (Intellect Press, 2010).
28. *Big Society*: still under the external discipline of the market, restrained by administration processes, and importantly under an internal discipline in the way people are intrinsically (morally) motivated. It is self-organising ... but obviously that organising stops at that (form of) organisation.
29. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5r8C6O0Jk5E>
30. Slavoj Žižek, *Violence*, 2008.

BETWEEN
IDEOLOGY
AND
IDENTITY

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 Wojciech Doroszuk
 Eduard Freudmann &
 Ivana Marjanović
 Elio Kasserou &
 Tanel Rannala
 Eva Laborkin
 Johannes Paul Raether
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