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CONSTRUCTED STORIES OF (NON)BELONGING TO EUROPE: PERFORMATIVE VIDEOS OF MARINA GRŽINIĆ AND AINA ŠMID

Abstract: In the video and new media art of Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid, the abstract quality of a technologically generated image and the mediated world becomes an expressive and politically informed means of a communication strategy across the region of post-Socialist Europe also called the former East. Working collaboratively for over thirty years now, and using mostly the medium of video, the artists juxtapose the memories of the Communist past and its symbolism with the paradoxes of the post-Socialist condition, and in doing so, engage in a critique of Western hegemony and global capitalism. Gržinić and Šmid's performative practice can be also 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. Gržinić and Šmid have always been working with a critique of ideologies portrayed as fluid, changing systems, revealing their rhetorical functions in the production of culture. Ideology is represented and manifested in their works in the body, history, and culture. This paper will examine some examples of their most recent works, discussing the opportunities for resistance tactics in contemporary art.

Keywords: video, media, politics, gender, resistance, body, performance.

THE MORPHING OF EUROPE: INTRODUCTION

In the beginning of the 1990s, the post-Communist rebirth of patriarchy across the Socialist Europe stimulated, and even arguably enhanced, gender tensions in the region. Tensions of such nature are particularly visible today in the socially and culturally conditioned reality associated with the political transformation and perpetual negotiation of ‘our European’ space. The Communist paradigms of Socialism and its accompanying rhetoric of

'equality' have been replaced with the 'new' return of the traditional female signifier. The female body which was once appropriated by the Communist Party as a symbol of ideological struggle has re-entered conservative and increasingly nationalistic political discourse envisaged as integral to the construction of the nuclear family. This historical appropriation and its importance in sustaining the productivity of the nation continue today across the region once called Eastern Europe.

Addressing the ever-changing European geo-political map, it is worth reflecting upon the notion of Europe itself. Let us consider its two main axes: those of space and of time. First, we might consider the spatial dimension. Looking through such a lens, Europe can be envisaged as a hybrid space; it is a socio-political and geographic space with strong economic ties (or less strong, provided the current Euro-zone crisis) that can be demarcated on the map, and an amalgamation of pluricultural and diverse places. Cultural plurality and linguistic polyphony make Europe unique. It is a rich cultural resource. Cultural plurality can be envisaged as a strength and a potential for a sustainable future. It can be also envisaged as a threat to cohesiveness and autonomy. Second, we might consider the time axis, or the temporal dimension. Europe is constantly changing. We need to think about the historic beginnings of Europe, then its various alterations, through the recent European acquisitions, to the Europe of today, and also the Europe-still-to-become. One important dimension of today's Europe is the experience associated with movement and the socio-political alteration of space.

Immersed for years in the reality of these socio-political and cultural changes, Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid play out the decentred position of the subject in the representations of being European, Balkan, Slovenian, ex-Yugoslavian, female artists working within the queer paradigm. The post-Communist legal and political systems have become increasingly masculinized, the gender relations are now more dichotomous through consumption and the culture of the spectacle, and the alternative social and cultural movements have become more stifled.

This has been a living and working reality for the artists. It seems that the deconstruction of the cultural and visual identities has become even more important for them not only in communicating the need for dismantling the patriarchal mechanism behind nationalism, but also in reflecting on the processes of undoing inequalities and exclusion by the dominant systems and their accompanying discourse.

The concepts of the nation, heritage, religion, family and state that hold significant positions in the processes of refashioning the national discourse of post-Socialist Europe have been put under scrutiny. What becomes evident through such concepts is the legitimization of patriarchy as a socio-economic, political and symbolic order. The consequences of the renewed patriarchy are often taken for granted, in particular the existence of social exclusion and gender inequality. On a parallel level, the socio-economic ‘progress’ and the status associated with EU membership are seen as ‘wanting’ in the Central and Eastern European region, where a significant proportion of the population experience a worsening living standard, largely as a result of the fast pace of the changes¹.

The specificity of post-Socialist Europe today is marked by the conceptual void that seemed to have grown over time, first after World War II as a gap between the Western Europe and the Communist Europe, until 1989, and second, between the Western Europe, the new EU acquisitions, and the rest of Europe, from 1989 onwards. Reflecting upon the histories and memories associated with the accelerated political changes of the former East, I have curated a video screening programme surveying the thirty years of Gržinić and Šmid’s practice that was showcased at the Centre of Contemporary Arts in Glasgow and at the Laznia Centre for Contemporary Arts in Gdansk in September 2012. This paper will examine the examples of the most recent works by Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid, while offering some reflections on the tactics of dissent and the possibilities of resistance through contemporary art practice.

THE BODY AND THE POLITICS

Gržinić and Šmid are Slovenian video artists who started working together in 1982². They had begun their collaboration on the underground music scene of

¹ 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. R. Ivezović, *The Fiction of Gender Constructing the Fiction of Nation: On How Fictions are Normative, and Norms Produce Exceptions*, in: J. Blagojević, K. Kolozova and S. Slapsak eds., *Gender and Identity: Theories from and/or on South-Eastern Europe*, Athena, KaktusPrint, Belgrade 2006.

² **Marina Gržinić** is an artist and professor at The Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. She also works at the Institute of Philosophy ZRC SAZU at the Slovenian Academy of Fine Arts in Ljubljana, Slovenia. **Aina Šmid** is an artist and former-editor of the Slovenian design magazine *Ambient*. She studied art history in Ljubljana, Slovenia. **Marina Gržinić**

the former Yugoslavia, combining the punk movement with performance art. Since then, they have collaborated on more than forty video art projects; they have produced films, animations and media installations; directed several video documentaries; and worked with television productions. The ironic gesture of their acting enhances the critically informed performances of different forms of subjection. This ambivalent performance of identities, at times contradicting one another, is realised through deconstruction, appropriation and narrative critique.

Gržinić and Šmid have adopted performativity as their working strategy. Employing the video and the new media, they turn the abstract quality of a technologically generated and mediated world into an expressive means of communication about the inequalities across the region of the former East, in particular the inequalities that are gendered.



Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid with Zvonka Simčič
Relations: 25 Years of the Lesbian Group ŠKUC-LL (2012), Documentary film, 84 min. Video still. Image © Gržinić and Aina Šmid

and Aina Šmid 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.

In 2012, Gržinić and Šmid produced, together with Zvonka Simčič, an 84-minute documentary film entitled *Relations: 25 Years of the Lesbian Group ŠKUC-LL*, which surveyed the processes of marginalization of the LGBT groups and the struggle for their rights in Slovenia and in the wider ex-Yugoslavia. The work comments on the artistic and cultural potential of ŠKUC-LL, its critical discourse, and its emancipatory politics, however marginally visible. It features a series of interviews, various art projects, political appearances and insights into its members' socializing and networking. The film positions the queer-related movements of ex-Yugoslavia within a wider context of Europe today and comments on the topical problems of the increasing institutionalization of protest and the mainstreaming of dissent. The extract below hints on the position of ŠKUC-LL in Europe:

Tatjana Greif (archaeologist and activist): 'I think that when we talk about the lesbian movement, or about such a group as the lesbian group ŠKUC-LL, then we can go into alliances primarily with those groups and movements that are similar to us... we all share the same mentality and [have to grapple with culture that reflects] the same patriarchal and traditional patterns, at least in this region, and therefore we understand each other very well. A lesbian group from Slovenia or a lesbian group from Serbia, we are immediately on the same line, as opposed to when we connect with some groups in the West. This is one thing. Of course, we connect with other movements, the gay movement, the queer movement, the movement of disabled people, the Roma minority, etc. We connect with all those that like lesbian initiatives are pushed to the edge, and they try to keep us there. This is performed systematically. We also cooperate with international organizations, with European networks, such as ILGA Europe, and the like. This type of connection is again different, as Europe is essentially characterized by a bureaucratic European touch. The priorities held by ILGA Europe, etc. differ from the priorities of ŠKUC-LL, or some other lesbian and gay groups in our space. Simply because ILGA Europe and others are part of the European system of institutions and operate not by their priorities, but according to the priorities given to them from the outside. This would also be, in a way, a critique of international activism, or of the Western type of activism that is slowly falling into a mainstream conservative flow, as it tries at all costs to be integrated and included, and therefore assimilated' (*Relations*, 2012, courtesy of the artists).

The constructed narratives of the screened stories can be envisaged here as a sort of leeway for enacting identities, their memories and histories, including the comments on the American author Kate Bornstein, influential in queer theory, and her fluid identification. Kate Bornstein's new collection (edited with S. Bear Bergman) *Gender Outlaws: The Next Generation* reveals a spectrum of possible gender-based identities, embracing identities that

combine both genders or are not based on gender, even dismissing the construct of gender as irrelevant. In the video, in the discussion on the appropriateness of LGBT terminology, we hear comments concerning Bornstein's own identification:

Suzana Tratnik (writer and activist): 'The movement is today called LGBT... For me, it was a moment of awakening when I was translating the book by Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaws*. Bornstein is an American activist, writer, transgender activist, who spent most of her life as a man and then changed sex. After being operated on, she is now a woman and a lesbian. The comments she received were something like "if you like women why did you undergo the operation, you could have remained a man who was with women" – as in the past she was a heterosexual man. She said, "no, I am a lesbian and I had to traverse this path". This testifies, on the one hand to an openness of these new gender definitions. On the other hand, she says, "I still have many skins. I had a male skin and I took it off. I had a heterosexual skin and I took it off. Now I am a lesbian. I don't know what follows.'" (*Relations*, 2012, courtesy of the artists)



Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid with Zvonka Simčić
Relations: 25 Years of the Lesbian Group ŠKUC-LL (2012),
Documentary film, 84 min. Video still. Image © Gržinić and Aina Šmid

Such a working strategy includes representing as well as posing or even staging of identities and their forms, advocated by media deconstruction. For gender identification, this strategy also includes tactics of female masquerade, performativity of a sexual nature, and the use of the body as well as role play.



Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid with Zvonka Simčić
Relations: 25 Years of the Lesbian Group ŠKUC-LL (2012),
Documentary film, 84 min. Video still. Image © Gržinić and Aina Šmid

The video surveys incidents of marginalization and opposition to LGBT movements. Most importantly in my view, *Relations* puts an issue of intolerance in a historical perspective. The excerpts of recordings featuring homophobic behaviour during Pride Parades from across ex-Yugoslavia over the last decade are intermingled with a historical analysis. Here is an example of the accounts:

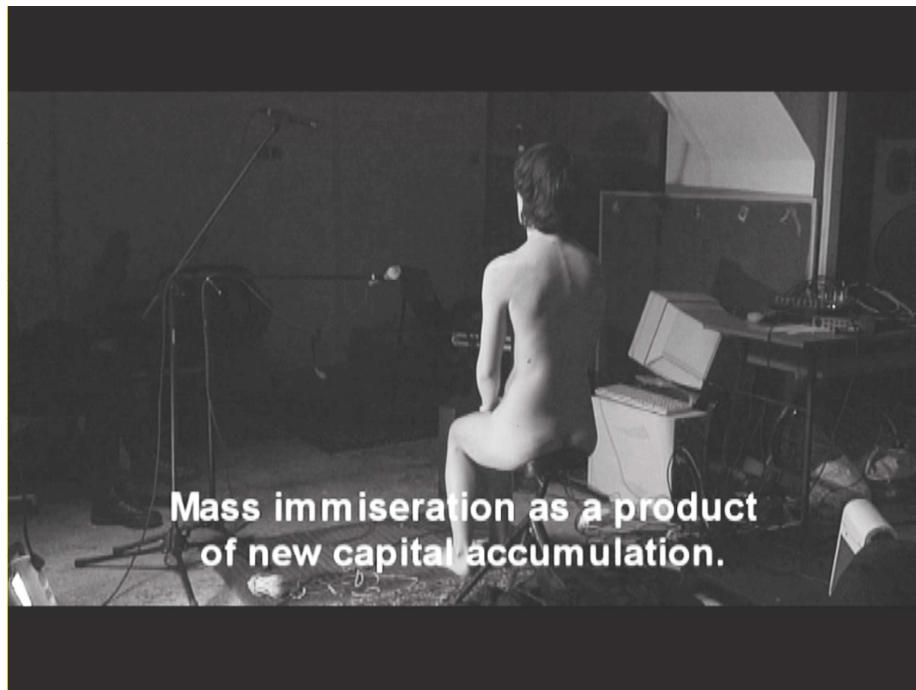
Lepa Mladenović (feminist activist from Belgrade, responding to the recordings): 'I always insisted that I did not create a political analysis of what was actually happening. As a member of the team that organized the Pride Parade in 2001 [in Belgrade], I did not realize what would happen. We did not take seriously the threats of the ultra-fascists from the organization Obraz (Face). When they said "We will beat you up" we thought it was just threats. We had experience with Žene u crnom (Women in Black). I myself had this experience. They hit us once, maybe twice, but never to death.'

I thought when we had demonstrated as Women in Black against Milošević, saying NO to the regime, as antifascists and for all victims of the war that this was a major political statement, bigger than lesbians and gays who want to publicly express their love, a celebration of love. We did not understand that this was a much bigger blow to patriarchy than saying NO to fascism. This was quite a surprise. But what was important was to see that this represented the continuation of Yugoslavia. In 2001 when we organized Pride, there were with us also feminists and lesbians from Zagreb and Ljubljana. They were with us in the parade. They came to be with us. In the end there were nearly a thousand of those who came to beat us up and twenty of us. We had not yet managed to gather when they already began to beat us up. Then it became really clear for the first time what kind of society we lived in.

We were wrong; we thought that with Djindjić we got democracy and that we had done with Milošević. We thought we could do what was to be done in a democracy. But we ignored, especially me, the fact that in those ten years, Milošević had created fascism, and we were not at all aware of it. And they were kids who hadn't experienced war. Those who had beaten us were not ex-soldiers, maybe only some of them. Actually, this is fascism which derives from that time and reproduces itself constantly. Its source is militarism and hatred of the other. So it is a constant production of hate' (*Relations*, 2012, courtesy of the artists).

Relations not only comments on such disturbing issues as rising nationalism or the manifestations of intolerance for difference, but most importantly, it offers answers, and a historical perspective on why we are now witnessing an

increase of homophobic behaviour across the region. However, there may be a problem with the reception of such politically informed works as *Relations*; the video relies primarily on a narrative and a rather dense text. It also takes 84 minutes to get the message across.



Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid with Zvonka Simčič
Naked Freedom (2010), Video, 19 min 50 sec. Video still. Image © Gržinić and Aina Šmid

Gržinić and Šmid often allude in their collaborative practice to the role of art-making and comment on the limits of art. In *Naked Freedom* (2010), the video realised in collaboration with Zvonka Simčič, the artists conceptualize the possibility of social change under the conditions of financial capitalism and commercialisation processes that permeate today's art production, as well as engaging with social, political and critical discourses. The collective process is represented as being about simultaneous enactment of social, political, and performative practices: it is a collective undertaking, a performance created for the screen that aims "to resonate with performers off screen". The work connects three cities: Ljubljana, Belgrade, and Durham in

the USA and presents a conceptual political space of engagement that allows for rethinking the meaning of ‘the local’ and the conditions of membership in the contemporary communities of practice. The artists ask who is to be left out of the opportunities for social engagement.

Seven young activists, musicians, poets, and youth workers, members of the Youth Centre Medvode, have met in a village (Medvode) near Ljubljana in order to discuss the key political terms such as capitalism, colonialism, education, and the power of art as a possibility for a political intervention. What the work exposes are the utopian illusions of the possibility for radicalization and change in search for a ‘proper life’. Young activists from Medvode cite the work of Jonathan Beller, Achille Mbembe, Gilles Deleuze and others, and their discourse appears overly academic. Mbembe is quoted as saying that ‘What connects terror, death, and freedom is an ecstatic notion of temporality and politics’. One of the performers cites 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’.



Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid with Zvonka Simčič
Naked Freedom (2010), Video, 19 min 50 sec. Video still. Image © Gržinić and Aina Šmid

The work attends to the questions associated with social change and idealism vis-à-vis the power of youth, and it comments on the possibilities of initiating a participatory practice through the making of the video. The process potentially consolidates social relations, revealing a collective agency seeking new possibilities.

The Belgrade-based artist and performer Siniša Ilić deconstructs violence through his drawings, commenting on the shift from what can be referred to as hetero-normative violence to nationalistic forms of violence. His performative drawings presented in the video connect different spaces within the realm of culture, art and activism. The drawings depict violence in a rather grotesque manner, disclosing brutality as a result of nationalist homophobic tendencies that are common today in post-Socialist spaces, including aggression against different sexual orientation or lifestyle, or against transgender persons. Instances of violence, as well as aggressive parental authority or gender-based victimisation are all grafted onto poverty and low living standards³. This can be further extended and 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.

Current EU border policies and practices epitomise the position of a developed capitalist society that enforces the mechanism of exclusion through its migration laws. Manuela Bojadzijev, drawing on Nirmal Puwar's work on global politics, argues that in contemporary theorising the migrant is repeatedly portrayed as an agency and migration as a movement, symbolising the 'other' of democracy. She cites Puwar's argument that it is the black subject, the subaltern (fe)male, the migrant, and the exile that are in the spotlight today⁴. On the one hand, such representation seems to result from the fascination with the subversive forces that are ascribed to the migration movement, the social struggle and the production of cultures. On the other, it also reflects the superficiality of media representation and the production of still images of migration politics and migrants through the prism of victimisation and oppression discourse, and subsequently, such fascinations are paraphrased and narrated through visual culture and research.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ M. Bojadzijev, *Migration. Still Speaking about Autonomy*, in: M. Gržinić and T. Ostojić, eds., *Integration Impossible? The Politics of Migration in the Artwork of Tanja Ostojić*, Argobooks, Berlin 2009.

Some artists have started to address more directly the hierarchy of human rights and its gendered nature as well as the citizenship-related privileges in the border crossing-related issues in today's Europe and beyond. The Berlin-based, Serbian born artist Tanja Ostojić's photograph *Untitled/After Courbet (L'origine du monde)* (2004) is a re-make of Gustav Courbet's painting *L'origine du monde* (1866); it is a close-up of a female crotch in EU flag panties that epitomises the Fortress Europe, the EU-Europe, envisaged as a body, a gendered body, a sexualised body and a symbol of the EU citizen's rights. The flag censors and provokes. The yellow starry circumference of the Union's symbol against the blue background acts as a signifier – the multiple intersections of the border control and sexuality in Europe today. Ostojić's reference to Courbet is not only to a visual representation, but also to his position as a politically concerned artist, engaged with the class struggle during the Paris Commune. The male gaze of the 19th century artist reflects clearly the gender power of the master in control of the way of seeing and representing the woman's body. Perhaps, as Grzinic argues, Ostojić points at another origin in re-enacting Courbet's piece, i.e. at "the origin of the EU that resides in libidinal organizations and differentiations that hegemonise, sort and regulate the social, economic and administrative body of Europe"⁵, in other words emphasising the political discourse of the 'Fortress' Europe. Indeed, one of the key issues in Europe today is the question of restrictive migration and asylum laws across all the EU states. That problem reflects other borders too. Bojadzijev (2009) also points out that the idea of the autonomy of migration is associated with various concepts, including 'the right to escape', 'the socio-economic struggle of migration', wage labour, slavery, and the dynamics of post-colonialism⁶. The autonomy of migration is also gendered.

The last section of the video *Naked Freedom* addresses the question of border control and comments on the status of those seen as non-EU, and even more so, as non-citizens in Europe. More specifically, the status of the citizens from African nations in 'Fortress Europe' is addressed through several references made to the migrant workers who are trying to live and survive in the European Union of today. In parallel, a historical analysis is offered of the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion and prevention of the 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

⁵ M. Gržinić, *De-Coloniality of Knowledge* in: *Integration Impossible*, op. cit., p. 190.

⁶ M. Bojadzijev, op. cit.

February 2010. The workshop was organised by the Centre for Global Studies and the Humanities director, Argentinean literary theorist, Walter Mignolo, and it aimed to explore such political concepts as global colonialism and the geopolitics of knowledge production.



Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid with Zvonka Simčić
Naked Freedom (2010), Video, 19 min 50 sec. Video still. Image © Gržinić and Aina Šmid

Kwame Nimako runs the National Institute for the Study of Dutch Slavery and its Legacy in Amsterdam. Here, the video becomes a kind of docufiction, 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. It is the history based on the established hegemonic mechanisms of division that are the outcome of post-colonialism. These stories are 'forgotten' today, but are steadily lived and reproduced through Western European food policies' divisions of the world.

When we think about Europe, we reflect upon geo-politics on the one hand and on embodied experience and cognitive dimension on the other, always in relation to change and transformation. Change is inherent in the current situation and linked to the development of new technologies, globalisation, and the movement of people and ideas. Transformation is associated with the processes of the relocation of labour, educational experience, the change of lifestyle. It manifests itself through migration and various diasporas. The number of people crossing the borders in greater than ever before. On the one hand, we can observe a facilitation of migration policy, and an easing of border controls. On the other, we see a proliferation of the walls that continue to divide the spaces of Europe into us and them. These are symbolic walls and less visible walls reminiscent of the Berlin wall now transformed into an East Side gallery showcasing the murals. The gallery reminds us about the political, socio-economic and cultural divide between the West and the East, once the Eastern Bloc, now a new European space. However, the symbolic walls are stronger than their physical manifestations. They prevail and continue to exist in the cognitive space and the systemic structures across the geo-political map of Europe, despite their material disappearance. The mobility across the national borders remains a privilege rather than a norm. When we consider the questions of migration and diaspora-related experience, it is being on the ‘right’ side of the wall that determines the versions of sovereignty, the citizenship-related entitlements, including the economic rights. The embodied experience and personal accounts can be seen as the signifiers of crossing the wall, border crossing, migration routes and various diasporas.

In *Naked Freedom* it is the video itself, the process of its production, that opens up possibilities for dissent. The tactics of resistance, which introduce the concept of emancipation and alternative voices in artistic practice, give rise to political alliances with others, in particular with those seen as ‘outsiders’. The structure of *Naked Freedom* constructs what Gržinić has called a revolutionary *dispositif* – that is a project for a possible change, for a different society, different politics and different place of art in the realms of 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

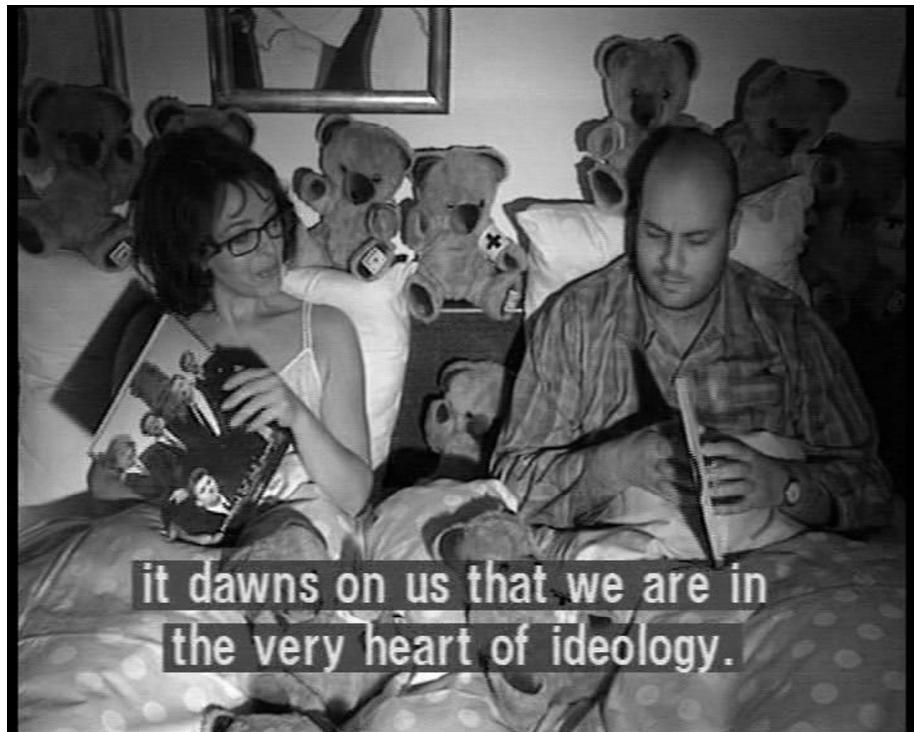
and politics”⁷. Indeed, Gržinić’s message is that one (here the fe/male artist from the East) exists or is made possible solely on the basis of the subversive performance of various identity-roles and its misrepresentation: “There is no difference between my writing, my video, my lectures at the art academy in Vienna: they are all part of the same painstaking, almost bureaucratic work of insisting on constant differentiation and contamination. Everything I do is a 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 production and also because art today has signed a clear and visibly normalized contract with capital”⁸.



Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid,
Post-Socialism + Retro Avant-Garde + Irwin (1997), Video, 22 min 05 sec. Video still.
Image © Gržinić and Aina Šmid

⁷ M. Gržinić in conversation with Ana Vujanović, in: M. Gržinić and T. Velagić eds., *New Media Technology, Science and Politics: The Video Art of Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid*, Locker, Vienna, 2008.

⁸ *Ibid.*



Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid,
Post-Socialism + Retro Avant-Garde + Irwin (1997), Video, 22 min 05 sec. Video still.
Image © Gržinić and Aina Šmid

The ambiguous position of belonging to and existing on the periphery of Europe (a position associated with marginal influence in global cultural discourse) further complicates the construction of identity. Gržinić is very aware of the periphery of art production emerging from post-Socialist contexts. She employed Lacan's notion of lamella, the field between two deaths – the symbolic and the real, to explain how to visualize the position of post-Socialist Europe in the European Community today: "The ultimate object of horror is this life beyond death, an immortal or indestructible object, the life that is void, emptied from the symbolic structure. EE is represented as a surplus of Europe, as if before the fall of the Berlin Wall it wasn't European enough. 'I am a piece of shit' may be the first condition required for EE to

take upon itself all the characteristics of a modern subjectivity".⁹ In a sense, what we can learn from the positioning of post-Socialist Europe today is a kind of traumatic reality, evident through the surface of the emerging works. And these works are still waiting to be reintegrated into the global art scene and the dominant art discourse.

Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid have been offering a critique of different ideologies portrayed always as fluid, changing systems, attempting to reveal their rhetorical functions particularly in the appropriation of cultural production. Ideology for them is manifested in the body, history, and culture. Their collaborative practice points at a visible trend of resistance tactics in contemporary art. Yet, they seem to imply that emancipatory and alternative voices in artistic practice can only emerge collectively, parallel with the processes of reflecting upon the 'outsiders' in the context of post-Socialist mapping of the non-Ccapitalist world. The work *Postsocialism + Retroavantgarda + IRWIN* (1997), in which the video itself becomes a medium for philosophical reflection about the cultural, artistic and political spaces in the current conditions of post-Socialism in the territories of former Yugoslavia in the 1980s and 1990s. The video features the IRWIN group, Mladen Stilinović and Kasimir Malevich. Their artistic projects with their relation to the Socialist and post-Socialist ideology code in a specific way the geographical space of former Yugoslavia. The result of this coding is *Retroavantgarda* – an attempt to frame newly constructed art-retro-formation through technology. Slavoj Žižek and Peter Weibel are also being heard. The utopian alternative mapping of the non-Capitalist world, as Gržinić and Šmid showed in *Postsocialism + Retroavantgarda + IRWIN*, does not 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 or anti-academic and are involved in more 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 and fictional unity as presented by Gržinić and Šmid. The term 'retro-avant-garde' refers to an artistic movement that was positioned in the context of the post-Socialist reality and supposed to represent 'the soft revolution' in post- Socialist art and culture.

Gržinić and Šmid pointed out in *Retroavantgarda* that the East has not provided the West with the relevant theoretical and interpretative tools to understand the uniqueness and diversity of the artistic projects that originate

⁹ M. Gržinić, *Fiction Reconstructed: Eastern Europe, Post-Socialism and the Retro-Avantgarde*, ed. Selene Springerin, Vienna 2000, pp. 35-36.

in the former East. Yet, we could also argue that the cultural and theoretical domains in the former East are often incapable of offering critique, interpretations, or self-reflection on the artistic projects and the cultural phenomena originating in post-Socialist spaces.

What are the options for dissent through art practice? For Gržinić and Šmid, the solution is to work through a “contaminating strategy”, merging spaces, institutions, the inside and the outside, and thinking in terms of different economies and using different institutional *dispositifs* in which one is situated, works and lives; to question ownership, for instance the ownership of histories, including feminist histories. I am loosely drawing on Bell Hooks’ notion of a feminist movement, advanced in *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (2000), constructing a narrative around the visual representations embedded in action and proposing to merge a kind of restless criticality with social consciousness. Such a method incorporates an element of self-criticality, including a reflection on positioning, on class, race, gender, sexuality and so on. In addition to giving a more inclusive approach to gender representation and its geographies, this is a self-reflexive way of de-centering, an attempt at 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 the *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-liberalism and nationalism further complicate the reference to *the* feminist movement. As such, I would argue for fragmentary and spatial fluidity and temporal manifestations of multiple feminisms. 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 organization. She states: “With the fragmentation of the feminist critique comes the selective incorporation and partial recuperation of some of its stands”¹⁰.

¹⁰ N. Frazer, *Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History*, “New Left Review”, March-April 2009, no. 56, p. 99.

I would argue that the performative practice offered by Gržinić and Šmid could be seen as a platform for the reflection on critical art or as a comment or intervention in the politics of the everyday, through the formation of 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, when they are able and ready to admit a sense of non-belonging. Such cultural strategies require, as Chris Townsend (2007) argues, an awareness of marginal positioning that professional Western artists do not accept and, I would add, of which they are not always aware¹¹. Such practices that are not Capitalist-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, such artistic utopias found at this intersection and their resisting identities remain invisible in the global discourse of art.



Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid, HI-RES (2006), Video, 20 min 57 sec. Video still.
Image © Gržinić and Aina Šmid

¹¹ Ch. Townsend, *Protest Art*, “Art Monthly”, February 2007.

Gržinić and Šmid's video *HI-RES* (2006) critiques the power of the market that dominates the art world. The dominant art market position determines the written texts, the production of critical works, and also the international curatorial practices. The dominant market also determines the language of the cultural production. In the video, a contemporary dance performance serves as a metaphorical background for a dense narrative analysis of the global capitalist system and its 'performative' politics. A debate is conducted in the garden of a typical middle-class house on the outskirts of Ljubljana. Questions are asked about the significance of geo-political location for the limits of intervention through art production and its representation in the new European spaces. As the narration unfolds, the art in post-Soviet countries becomes amalgamated with a monster; becomes part of the capitalist machinery.

Although post-Socialist art practice is becoming increasingly integrated into global neo-liberal Capitalism, post-Socialist artistic perspectives have something different to communicate. Their creativity has less to do with a specific repertoire of particular art forms, and more with a series of idiosyncratic aesthetic strategies and local applications of already familiar forms. These forms include echoes of transgressive gestures, the utopian promise of the avant-garde, playing with the subversive techniques of performance, and the appropriation of technology. The processes of constructing socio-economic and cultural identity are constituted by an interesting hybrid of ideological domination, resistance, and socio-economic and cultural change initiated in the 1990s, a decade which saw the artistic status of the former East redefined in a globalised (arts) market while nevertheless appealing to what constitutes 'our reality'. The discourse of belonging to the 'new Europe' now forms a more powerful locus of a management of meanings by which national culture is maintained and transmitted, and the exploitative nature of capitalism is nevertheless criticised, while local politics and the rise of nationalism is both praised and challenged. Such a position can result in a certain way of seeing, drawing on Ingmar Bergman's *Through a Glass Darkly*, a way of seeing that challenges the reduction of the core values that make us¹².

¹² K. Kosmala, *Through A Glass Darkly: Performative Practice... Without Border, Without Name*, "Variant Magazine" 41, Spring 2011.



Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid, HI-RES (2006), Video, 20 min 57 sec. Video still.
Image © Gržinić and Aina Šmid



Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid, HI-RES (2006), Video, 20 min 57 sec. Video still.
Image © Gržinić and Aina Šmid

ON POLITICAL RE-FRAMINGS: CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, we could argue that the processes of identification are bound with their regions, represented through historical issues and the framing of political events. These processes can be expanded to culturally conditioned, socio-political practices and their geographies. Gržinić and Šmid's narrations of both belonging and non-belonging to post-Socialist spaces, manifested as a sense of fragmented, resisting, ambivalent and performative micro-hi/stories, reveal the dynamics of both 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.

Gržinić and Šmid's narrations are based on a technical constitution of temporality. Today, in the new media world, digitalization and the condensation of the intervals of exposure whether in photographic, film-based, or digitally produced works, and an increasing speed of image circulation, we experience the radical emptying out of visual work, a process that involves an image evacuation. This process of emptying out of an image and also ways of reorganizing an image has a significant impact upon the conception of history, memory and of the body. Gržinić commented on the aesthetic process of image sterilization: "Mistakes in the images, once reminders of the reality and temporality of existence, are lost. The image undergoes the process of 'emptying out', this process mediates between time and space and the human experience of time and space".¹³

The artists comment on the evolving discourse of a nation, heritage, religion, family and state and reframe cultural values that stem from such terms. Yet, in the videos of Gržinić and Šmid, the real images, including images of war or representation of political protest (for instance in the video *Luna 10*) are purposefully abstracted, merged with the visualization of the body, and hence made less direct. It is in my view an indirect attempt to criticize the media's central role in re-shaping the reception of an ever-expanding mass media-generated political discourse and the culture of today.

¹³ M. Gržinić, *Fiction Reconstructed*, op. cit., pp. 212-214.



Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid, *Luna* 10 (1994) Video 10 min 35 sec. Video still.
Image © Gržinić and Aina Šmid

**KONSTRUOWANIE OPowieści O (NIE)PRZYNależNOŚCI DO EUROPY:
VIDEO PERFORMANCE MARINY GRŽINIĆ I ANY ŚMID
(streszczenie)**

W sztuce wideo oraz nowych mediów Mariny Gržinić i Ainy Šmid abstrakcyjność świata przedstawianego i poznawanego przy pomocy nowoczesnej techniki staje się dzisiaj środkiem ekspresji w strategiach komunikowania całego regionu post-socjalistycznej Europy, obszaru tak zwanej dawniej Europy Wschodniej. Pracując razem przeszło trzydzieści lat w obszarze sztuki wideo, Marina Gržinić i Aina Šmid zestawiają wspomnienia o komunistycznej przeszłości i jej symbolice ze sprzecznosciami rzeczywistości post-socjalistycznej, angażując się przy tym w krytykę hegemonii Zachodu i globalnego kapitalizmu. Ironia gry sztuką pogłębia ich krytyczne sposoby przedstawiania uprzedmiotowienia i różnych form zależności. Pozowanie można tutaj postrzegać jako swobodną przestrzeń dla odtwarzanych tożsamości. Przy identyfikacji genderowej oznacza to także formę maskarady oraz performatywność tożsamości seksualnych. Ta ambiwalentna gra tożsamości, niekiedy sprzecznych ze sobą wartości, realizuje się przez dekonstrukcję, przywłaszczenie materiałów kultury masowej i mediów, oraz krytykę narratywną. Performatywność odnosi się tutaj do działań w obrębie kultury i praktyk

artystycznych, polegających na strategiach udawania i przyjmowania tożsamości oraz ich form. Gržinić i Šmid zajmują się krytyką ideologii przedstawionych jako płynne, zmienne systemy, przez co ukazują ich retoryczne funkcje w wytworzaniu kultury. Ideologia w ich pracach manifestuje się w ciele, historii i kulturze. Artykuł analizuje ich nowsze prace, nawiązując jednocześnie do tematu oporu i protestu we współczesnej sztuce.

Słowa klucze: wideo, media, polityka, gender, opór, ciało, performance.