

Me and You Without Border. Performing Feminism in Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid’s Naked Freedom

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What does it mean to produce art and to curate in contemporary Europe and in preformative times? Performing feminism in cultural production, without border, is situated in the new geopolitical reality of Europe and historically constructed hegemonic discourses of everyday. Being as much as possible outside the mainstream spaces, results in a sense of being outside the mainstream and more importantly outside the art market.

In discussing Čista svoboda [Naked Freedom] by Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid (2010), (im)possibilities of social change under the conditions of financial capitalism that permeate art production as well as politics of today are addressed.

I loosely draw on bell hooks’ notion of a feminist movement, advanced in *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (2000), constructing visual representation embedded in action, merging a kind of restless criticality with a social consciousness. Such method of engagement incorporates the element of self-criticality, including reflection one’s positioning, class, race as well as an inclusive approach to gender representation and its geographies; a self-reflexive way of de-centering, contesting and problematising the ongoing ideological constructions of European subjectivity.

INTRODUCTION: PERFORMATIVE TURN

The medium of performance that already challenged the hierarchy of the contemporary arts in the 1970s and its reiterations across European geographies has become once again an important dimension of re-entry in feminist critique about the gender, inequality and social injustice. Bringing performativity to the critique includes here use of alternative sites of production and presentation as well as forms of engagement with various degrees of informal networking platforms in challenging dominant ideologies.

Performative turn appears as a central tactic adopted in various initiatives of theory advancement and new curatorial strategies. The projects such as Public Preparation, Alternativa or to lesser degree Gender Check, I would argue are covertly dressed in a feminist critique of dominant politics without addressing it by name. Chandra Mohanty's term 'feminism without borders'¹, a trend focused on questioning socio-political change and social justice across spaces of existing social and economic divisions and various other in the context of globalisation and re-iterations of neo-liberal capitalism. 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 a place. A transitory state of oscillation between mimicking and assimilating the place, negotiate another shift in a state of political consciousness, another move in cultural production, realised as either birth or death of a more performative nature.

The term 'zeugmatic' in rhetoric refers to the use of a word to modify or govern more words when it is appropriate. Serial dislocations, migration mobility and a sense of derootedness that dislocation creates, metaphorically and materially reflect a movement, 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 appropriation of ideas, memory, body and sources of Diaspora-routed inspiration for re-writing history by addressing the current political condition in cultural production.

Performing feminism, without border and indeed without name, is here situated in the new geopolitical reality of Europe and historically constructed hegemonic discourses of today. Negotiating being outside the mainstream spaces, without border, results in a sense of being outside the law of mainstream cultural production. Feminist performance strategies of the 1970s are echoed in addressing critique of politics and art production today, and more importantly, cultural apathy we breathe in the new Europe. For instance Kathy Battista² in the recent issue of *Art Monthly* in her essay 'Performing Feminism' and addressing feminist performance art in the 1970s London, flagged the importance of domestic spaces and other venues (e.g. performing in the public transport) and their appropriation for art production in the response to lack of financial support at the time. Not much seem to have changed since then. Certainly not much changed regarding financial support. The crisis keeps unfolding. Being outside mainstream, as much then as now, being at the fringes of cultural production, results in a type of DIY aesthetics and performative identities. It is in particular a performance of the self that becomes a channel for a critique of current condition.

Discussing Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid's *Naked Freedom*, I loosely draw on bell hooks' notion of a feminist movement, advanced in her book *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (2000), constructing narrative around visual representation embedded in action and merging criticality with a social consciousness.

¹ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*, Duke University Press: Durham, 2003.

² Kathy Battista, 'Performing Feminism', *Art Monthly*, February, 2011.

RE-CONSIDERING THE BORDER

In new media art in particular, the abstract quality of technologically generated and mediated world becomes an expressive means of communication strategy of performing feminism praxis. Acting-in- art constructs a metaphor for performance; it becomes a strategy that can be envisaged as a sort of a leeway for enacting identities, micro-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.

Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid play out the decentred position of the subjects through representation; constructing a fact-fiction account of a being European, Balkan, Slovenian, ex Yugoslavian, female artists. Ironic gesture of their acting out enhances critically informed performance of different forms of subjection. This ambivalent performance of identities, at times in contradiction with one other, is realised through deconstruction, appropriation and narrative critique. Working collaboratively for over twenty years, using video as a medium for critique, the artists position memories of the Communist past and its symbolism with the contradictions of post-Socialist conditions, and in that way, engage in a critique of hegemony of the West and global capitalism.

In *Naked Freedom* (2010), most recent video work at the time of writing by Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid, the artists conceptualize the possibility of social change under the conditions of financial capitalism and commercialisation processes that permeate art, the social, political and the critical discourse today. The work also comments on the process of making. The collective process of making the video *Naked Freedom* is about simultaneous enactment of social, political, and performative practice. It is a collective venture performance for the screen that aims 'to resonate with performers off screen'. The work connects Ljubljana and Belgrade of the new Europe with Durham in the USA and presents a conceptual political space of engagement that allows for rethinking what local is, who can be part of contemporary communities of practice, who is to be left out, what is the price to be paid.

In Ljubljana 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 term as a 'proper life' under the current condition, 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 utopia vis a vis the power of youth, as well as initiates participatory practice through the making of the video via which social relations that are sealed, revealing a visible agency ready to ask for new possibilities (Image 1).



Image 1: Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid's *Naked Freedom* (2010). Video still

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 a vis the new geopolitical reality of Europe unfolds, a version of history based on the established hegemonic mechanisms of division that are today 'forgotten' but their traces lived through the European food policies.

The feminist root in the alternative art practices of resisting identities in new Europe spaces and performance today derives from this historical divide between private and public. Mihaela Mudure points out at complexity and ambiguous character of this particular link

between Eastern European feminisms and Communism³. This particular historically contested relationship requires uncovering of the coordinates of the ideological appropriation of feminism and a survival of some feminist spaces in the discourse of women emancipation entailed by the Communism.

Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid's practice point at resisting tactics in a relational sense (Kester, Bourriaud). The artists introduce the concept that emancipation and alternative voices in artistic production can only emerge from integration with other outsiders in the context of post-Socialist mapping of non-Capitalist world. The video structure constructs what Gržinić has called a revolutionary depositif – a kind of film that could include a project for a possible different society, different politics and different place of art in the political space. In an interview with Ana Vujanovic, Gržinić explained the importance of frames in their practice:

‘This is why 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 biopolitics, 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’⁴.

Gržinić's message is that one (here the CEE fe/male artist) is made possible or exist solely on the basis of 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)⁵.

³ We need to recognise an impact the evolution of EE feminism in last fifty years. Mudure defines such evolution as a move towards oxymoronic or zeugmatic spaces, the spaces comparable to the spaces claimed by the Third World feminisms since 1981, i.e. positions articulated by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua in *Radical Women of Colour*. These spaces of EE feminisms are indeed characterised by the position of separateness and the opposition while at the same time rhetorically claiming the unity and similarity. pp. 420-426.

⁴ Marina Grzinic in conversation with Ana Vujanovic. In Grzinic M and Velagic T (Eds) *New Media Technology, Science and Politics: The Video Art of Marina Grzinic and Aina Smid*, Locker: Vienna, 2008.

⁵ Ibid.



Images 2 and 3: Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid's HI-RES (2006). Video stills

A performative critique of power of the capitalist world that dominates the art world is advanced in another work by Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid entitled HI-RES (2006). In 21 min video, the contemporary dance performance serves as a metaphoric background for a dense narrative analysis of the global capitalist system and its 'performative' politics. A

debate is carried out on the premises of a garden, on the outskirts of Ljubljana revealing the influences of American suburbia-like stylization. The questions arise about the condition of the geo-political location for limits of cultural production and representation. The dominant art market position determines the written texts, production of critical works and also the international curatorial practices. Art in post-Soviet countries become a part of the capitalist machinery (Images 2 and 3).

Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid refer to Croatian artist and linguist Mladen Stilinović's point that 'An artist who cannot speak English is not an artist'. The artists put an emphasis on the linguistic articulation by adding 'An artist who doesn't speak English well is not an artist'. Being an artist in the dominant system is dependent on playing the rules of that system. The language becomes an instrument of the dominant ideology (of Anglo-American dominant art world), and the artist needs to become an owner of such language, needs to adhere by displaying good English skills and I would argue aesthetic preferences of the centre in art production to be recognised. Marina Gržinić explains her position:

The underground is a mother for me and my father is the rock 'n' roll and punk movement in Ljubljana. I grew up in the Ljubljana gay and lesbian scene and was thus closely linked with the theoretical power of the underground movement. Although I have a doctorate in philosophy, I am guided by the linking of theory and activist practice. Without the practical moment of involvement in a concrete situation and the attempt to change institutions and artistic and cultural practices theory doesn't make much sense to me. I am a defender of the linking of theory, politics and art. This is the only position that one can adopt in a world of inequality (Marina Gržinić in interview with Birgit Langenberger)⁶.

Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid through 'contaminating working strategy', merging spaces, institutions, the inside and the outside and thinking in terms of different economies and different institutional deposits in which one is situated, works and lives, question ownership, for instance, the ownership of histories, including feminist histories.

CLOSING COMMENTS

Nancy Fraser (2009) in her *New Left Review*'s essay on feminism and capitalism situates the feminist 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 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 crisis, 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'⁷.

I would argue the performative movement without name and without border could be seen as a way forward. There is a need to reflect on art practice that can comment on and intervene in politics of everyday life, through resisting agency. Such artistic strategies are possible when the artists can openly acknowledge their position as marginal and 'defeated' in the

⁶ Obtained from Marina Gržinić, 2007.

⁷ Nancy Fraser, *Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History*, *New Left Review*, 56, March-April, 2009, p 99.

world system. Such cultural strategies require, as Chris Townsend (2007) argues, a marginality positioning that Western professional artists are not accepting, and I would add, are not always aware of⁸. Such practices that are not Capitalism driven can become a means and a metaphor, however utopian or real, for social and political change in post-Socialist reality of everyday. Yet, artistic utopias found at this intersection and their resisting identities remain invisible to Western audiences. What we are left with is the persisting Berlin Wall.

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

Organizer: Hungarian University
 of Fine Arts
 Supporters: Budapest Spring Festival;
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**BETWEEN
 IDEOLOGY
 AND
 IDENTITY**

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

Curator: Rael Artel

Image 4: Public Preparation. Budapest Version. March- April 2011.

Feminist praxis without names and border, a Diaspora-infused movement of more a performative nature provides a politically charged platform of investigation and thus becomes relevant in terms of either the presence or absence of feminist politics in a socio-cultural milieu of today. Feminist politics don't need appear explicitly in certain contexts (as for

⁸ Chris Townsend 'Protest Art' Art Monthly, February 2007.

instance Gender Check), instead ‘feminisms’ and ‘post-feminisms’ became, possibly for the better, conflated or perhaps appropriated in the discourse of artists, critics and curators working with the politics, contemporary arts and new media. For instance, Public Preparation curatorial strategy born in Estonian forests involves art institutions through commissions of international scale exhibitions and simultaneously operates as a cross-border network-initiated venture involving the public through informal and appropriated spaces. Public Preparation is in a stage of rethinking how to re-activate the important discourses of politics and arts today. European cultural spaces continue divided by the symbolic walls made up of theoretical framings (Image 4).

What is needed is a theorisation that can capture the post-Socialist environment and its complexities related to appropriation of the feminist discourse by the Communist ideology and its evolutions and mutated versions today. Rosi Braidotti pointed at the need for the frameworks for comparisons of feminists philosophies between the CEE countries, as well as between CEE, the rest of Europe, the US and the developing countries. The reliance on Anglo-American feminisms do not seem to address the local specificity or reflect local reality. We need to accept once and for all that the feminisms and their manifestations in CEE cannot be solely grasped without a positioning in relation to minority women’s feminisms and Third World feminisms either.

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