

Positioning in borderless Europe A conversation between *h.arta* and *Kontekst*

Kontekst: You are living and working in a former Eastern European country which is now part of the EU. We are currently witnessing general euphoria in Europe regarding the celebration of the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin wall. Many exhibitions and projects related to the topic have been organized, art works produced, etc. How would you comment on that?

***h.arta*:** In the early nineties, after the end of the communist regime and during the period of "transition" in Romania, there was a sentence commonly used in the political speeches from the entire ideological specter and broadly reproduced through the mass media: "Now finally, Romania can start to belong to Europe again". This sentence repeated in sentimental references to the sacrifices of the revolution or in practical observations about the sacrifices needed to be made by the population in order to insure the success of the transition and the process of joining the EU, meant the same thing in both cases: the communist period was such a powerful abnormality that it had the ability not only to stop time and keep our country away from the developments of Europe, but also to challenge its spatial perception. This was the message sent out during the transition period and this is the message also contained now in the celebrations of the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin wall: the countries of the socialist block lived for almost 50 years in a confined space and in a gap in history that should be erased in order to return to the "normality" signified by the freedom of circulation (more of capital than of people). The "borderless" Europe that is celebrated this year through so many cultural events (and perhaps the current economic crisis and the questions this crisis raises regarding the success of global neo-liberalism is a catalyst of this celebratory euphoria) is the end result of this process of erasing all differences, the process through which poverty and exploitation are hidden under an apparent freedom of movement for everyone.

Kontekst: What you describe is symptomatic of how the EU-Europe constructs itself through the idea of belonging: belonging to Western Europe (liberal capitalist). This idea is actually an ideology that means expansion (of course of its markets). To belong to Europe means to belong to Western Europe. This process is not a dynamic process of exchange (though it is often presented as such). It is a one-way process as Tihomir Topuzovski¹ explained. To belong means to adopt and implement a wide range of so called values belonging to Western democracies which of course make the process of exploitation possible and secure. However, if we take a look at the history of colonialism as the European modernity project and also if we are not blind to what is going on at the moment where Europe is increasingly sinking into processes which Žarana Papić² termed the *fascisation* of societies, we must ask ourselves what values we are really talking about here.

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Tihomir Topuzovski, "FROM THE IMAGINING OF THE BALKANS TO THE INVENTION OF THE WESTERN BALKANS", Reartikulacija, Issue 6, Ljubljana, 2009,
http://www.reartikulacija.org/RE6/ENG/hardcore6_1_ENG_topu.html

2

Žarana Papić, "Europe after 1989: ethnic wars, the fascisation of social life and body politics in Serbia", in: Filozofski vestnik, special issue The Body, (ed.) Marina Gržinić Mauhler, FI ZRC SAZU, Ljubljana, 2002, p. 191-205

h.arta: How is the topic of Kultur Kontakt's broader international project "Without Borders" relevant in the context of your work?

Kontekst: Regarding the question of context and since we are speaking from two contexts (as one of us currently lives in Vienna and one in Belgrade) we would like to mention two events from our contexts, which are paradigmatic for the current situation in contemporary Europe which would also answer your question. One is "Operation Spring", the biggest police raid since WW2 launched in Austria in 1999 when more than a hundred African migrants were imprisoned and accused without proper proof in the trials under the shield of "fighting organized crime". This operation is part of the ongoing practice of criminalization and violence against migrants in Austria in the last 10 years (the same situation also exists in other EU countries). The other event is the "Belgrade Universiade 2009", an international sports event for which occasion an informal Roma settlement situated next to the athletes' residential area was brutally dismantled by the city authorities in order to produce an image of "clean" Belgrade and "clean" Serbia. Thus, both events tell us a great deal about alarmingly institutionalized racism and nationalism which must be seen in connection with European colonial history, European nationalism with its war politics and present neo-liberal policy that values profit more than human life and that needs hierarchies in order to keep running. Hence, Europe after 1989 tells us about these and many other discriminatory developments and not about justice and democracy which is only nominally mentioned.

h.arta: Perhaps, further on, we could discuss our approach to the topic of the present "Without Borders" project. Later on we could also answer this question ourselves.

Kontekst: Concerning our conceptual approach to this topic, we think it is the only possible one: as soon as you are framed in such a way, you have to discuss the frame, and you have to analyze all processes that are hidden or invisibilized. Therefore, we want to show how capitalism functions and how hazardous it is.

On the methodological level, our decision was to consider how to attempt not to reproduce established hierarchical representation regimes immanent to the curatorial practice as we know it today (a practice that fails to question the division of labor and working conditions), and immanent to the institution of contemporary art. So, we are interested in researching work procedures and formats such as collective authorship, collaborative projects, and not hegemonic curatorial selection processes for the sake of pure representation and reproduction.

In that sense, we can go back to your own artistic practice. Can you go into more detail about your approach in developing your own concepts, methods and formats? As you have based your artistic practice on the rethinking of art space as space for informal networks, interdisciplinary joint work, reading texts, debates, workshops, screenings, etc, do you think such an approach can challenge "the neutrality" of the art space? And do you think it can generate a potential for new subject positions and practices?

h.arta: What is most important for us in our practice is to constantly question our position as artists, as citizens, as women based in a country that used to be part of the former „East“, as "white" women living what is now a „European“ country, as cultural workers who are part of a system with all its contradictions, with all its fakeness and hypocrisy sometimes and still with all its potential to produce

meaningful analysis and critique. And, of course this work of continually examining one's own role and position cannot be done outside collective practices, outside collaborative work and inter-disciplinary practice, trying to create models for work that bring theory as close as possible to practice and that also encourage debate and continually attempt to correct the inherent hierarchies that are created inside groups. We consider art to be a good method of making this sort of analysis possible, of creating the situations for meaningful encounters and discussions.

When you describe your own work it is always difficult to clarify within the structure of your writing the gap that always exists between some sort of ideal projection of what your work wishes to be and the actual accidents, failures, and compromises that your work inherently contains. And we think that it is in the very analysis of this gap where the potential for change lies.

We consider that perhaps the most relevant thing one can do in a world where exploitation and violence is always hidden under a screen of words (communist propaganda, Christian „morality“, neo-liberal „democracy“, etc), is to constantly make yourself aware of this gap between the words and the actual realities they conceal (while also constantly trying to correct your own gap between your words and your actual everyday life and decisions). This brings us back to our question about our position towards the topic of a „borderless“ Europe. We completely agree with your answer and we share your approach: when the general tone is one of celebration of the end of all contradictions, it is important to discuss exactly those contradictions and inequalities that are the fabric of the capitalist system.