

Living ahead, working with legacy

Identity, representation, performative politics and curatorial practice in the City of Women

by Katja Kobolt in collaboration with Dunja Kukovec

When people hear of the City of Women in Ljubljana, they imagine a Soviet, pseudo-feminist committee based in Slovenia. However, this gendered event has nothing to do with the former Soviet Union or with pseudo-feminism: City of Women is an example of feminism as direct political action.

City of Women is a transdisciplinary international festival organised by the Association for the Promotion of Women in Culture. It produces and commissions a variety of direct actions throughout its events: performances, art works, film screenings, panels, concerts, publications, radio, a web platform, and a net label, for example. Distinctive features of the programme include time-based art, live discourse, and a plurality of artistic expressions, venues and audiences.

The festival promotes positive discrimination based on gender difference. Yet, the organisers and artists still face questions such as, "Why do we need to encourage public representation and articulation of women's creativity in a democratic society like the European one?" "Did the festival improve the position of women in the Slovenian society?" The expectation that an art event could create a general improvement of gender relations in any given social context is symptomatic of a political scepticism. It also speaks of a much-needed re-evaluation of the relation between arts vs. politics.

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The role of arts and theoretical discourses can be to expose the methods of regulation in social and individual lives (such as subjectivisation through differences in gender, class, ethnicity, and so on). These discourses can suggest possible sign (dis)orders and draft paths to subversion. They can generate moments of inclusive perception.

Within contemporary feminist communities, inclusiveness is often marked - in part - by a level of queer/LGBT recognition. For instance, projects such as Rde e zore (Red Dawns) in Slovenia and the Balkan region - with which City of Women is a part of a loose feminist-activist-queer network (FAQ) - uses queer/LGBT tagging. City of Women does not. Why? Because the "Politics of tagging" functions both as a communication code and a performative trait of identity politics.

The social articulation and interpretation of art is often already gendered; the "Politics of tagging" plays with this malestream positioning: it goes back and forth between the margin and the mainstream. Using tagging to self-position and self-identify in art and activist projects creates classification, mapping, and grouping - a fast communication transfer and instant understanding of de-territorialised phenomena and notions.

Hyper-usage of tags and icons in a masquerade manner propagates queer practice. However, this tactic also evacuates queer practices to some extent; if the method gets stiff, the tag - and with it the practice in question - becomes a commodity, subjectivised under an "over code" or master narrative.

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This is why City of Women - apart from its insistence on "women's authorship" - changes its focus each year. The annual festival theme functions as a tool to raise political and ethical questions; if City of Women explores environmental appropriation, bio- power and similar issues in 2008, then the 15th City of Women festival in 2009 considers the "Global South" and its concerns.

Our event is sometimes criticised for failing to represent a broad feminist women's agenda (addressing violence against women, sexuality, maternity, domestic labour, economical conditions, and so on). These issues are surely important, but as a programmer of a gendered-event, one should always re-question agency. Where is agency generated? Is it a trend? Do our relational environments (media, geo-, bio-politics, and so forth) generate our capacity to act? To what extent are our processes and discourses permeable to power relations? Even theoretical discourses are prone to trends.

Launched in the mid 1990s, City of Women aligns itself to the legacy of 1980s feminism. Whilst the festival has been significantly influenced by recent gender theories, and embodies some third wave concepts, City of Women has never claimed the existence of an essentialised "women's art" - rather, we have asserted a "queer (art) position".

Several activities are consistent: internationality, transdisciplinarity, local and global agendas, the use of different venues, and, above all, the focus on women's authorship. A fourteen-year history like this creates a sense of continuity that is full of interruptions; the

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creative potential of our repetition resides in the contingency of difference generated by its subjects. Temporality and spatiality are important factors. Which brings us to a new set of questions: Where are we now? In what moment do we inhabit a particular place? What is our situated knowledge?

Organisers, international artists, theoreticians, and activists collectively generate the agenda of the City of Women festival in all of their particularities. Spatiality is a determinant in this process - as it is in broader arts practices - because of geo-, bio-political, and bio-capital conditions.

City of Women has fought against lack of space, under-nurtured financial situations, and precarious conditions since 1995. In many aspects, the festival is subjected to the "over code" of mainstream art systems, with the same exoticising, normative expectation towards peripheral communities, genders and artists. There is room for empowerment within this model; the City of Women tries to establish a "coming together" of women from different parts of the world to raise their own agendas.

City of Women presents sounds that introduce errors, and musicians and artists not yet too exploited by the creative industries (who are not afraid of claiming agency). You will find these artists at our online archive - there have been so many exciting musicians at City of Women, it would be a pity to reduce this plurality to just a couple of names here. Write to us if you are one of the artists and we do not know each other yet.

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www.cityofwomen.org

www.cityofwomengoesweb.org

Katja Kobolt and Dunja Kukovec have been Art Directors for the City of Women Association for the Promotion of Women in Culture since 2006, and are currently expanding festival production to throughout the year. They face the creative challenge of keeping the festival as community-based and open-minded as possible, to achieve a City of Women where collaboration, discussion and creative networking are valued as equally as representation and communication.