

## **Female Consequences: Sex and Rock'n'Roll**

by Marina Grzinic

I will discuss a series of performance activities by women artists in the territory of ex-Yugoslavia, more precisely in Slovenia from the 1980s to the present. My aim is also to articulate the broader implication of feminism and post-feminist theories, staged sexuality and masquerade tactics of perversion and violence in relation to video, rock'n'roll and punk music and their performative politics. It is a question of history as well, or better to say, of genealogies of women's activities in worlds outside the capitalist First World, and the way in which these genealogies are included in the big story about female consequences for radical art and theory. This history is not reconsidered seriously in Ljubljana, Slovenia, either; it is only from time to time retold within the insiders' circles of the underground movement of the 1980s in former Yugoslavia.

I would like to propose a thesis that the feminist experience in the 1970s laid the foundations for the avant-garde production in art and culture in Belgrade and Zagreb in a manner similar to the way Lacanian psychoanalytic discourse re-articulated the theoretical and art framework of the late 1970s and 1980s in Slovenia. As opposed to the strong feminist movement in the West - which in the 1970s in the entire East European territory came really powerfully politically to life only in Belgrade and Zagreb - Slovenia had to wait for its feminist - better to say queer, drag and king - coming out until the 1980s, in a time of strong subcultural and rock'n'roll movements in Ljubljana, and in a time when the gay population publicly declared its homosexuality. This coming out was marked primarily by gay men, who were very active presenting their art and cultural work within the Studentski

## dig me out

kulturni center or SKUC (Student Culture Center) in Ljubljana. A process of a public coming out for women's rights and lesbianism took place slightly later.

Feminist activism in art and culture was connected with groups such as Meje kontrole st. 4 (The Borders of Control No.4) and Borghesia, which, with radical women members at their core, were staging in the 1980s performances connected with music and video in relation to politics, history and sexuality. Lesbian positions were performed in front of the video camera and pornography was used to attack official high art modernism that was tolerated in socialism. It was in the 1990s and at the beginning of the third millennium, that processes of radical women's (and lesbian practices) were finally clearly conceived in Slovenia. Lesbian women started publishing the magazine Lesbo which was, throughout the 1990s, one of the most important magazines for activism, theory and political writing. In the 1990s the festival for women's arts and culture The City of Women was established in Ljubljana.

It was therefore within the specific context of punk culture and the underground during the 1980s in Ljubljana, that the rebirth of the video in Slovenia took place. Punk culture and its artistic offshoots in general, provided shifts in the medium of art. At this time numerous new social movements such as the gay and later the lesbian movement, emerged from the Ljubljana's alternative or subculture movement. In this context video established itself quite quickly as an appropriate medium for the expression of the new generation. Non-professional video equipment (VHS), its simple handling, extremely fast production and reproduction - repeated performing of new messages - all this has made of video one of the most popular, and radical forms of media for the 80s generation. Crucial for the 1980s second birth of video art in ex-Yugoslavia was that in its VHS home-video form, the medium could bypass censorship

## dig me out

within the socialist context. VHS video allowed filming and editing at once or by a single artist or cultural activist. Precisely because of this free from immediate censorship, but not released at all by ideological, political and aesthetic frames, it could change the parameters of (socialist) art.

The first work in the 1980s produced within such horizons of thinking and imbued with the ideology of the underground was *Icons of Glamour, Echoes of Death* (Ikone glamourja, odmevi smrti) from 1982. Its author was the group *The Borders of Control No.4*.<sup>1</sup> The video is about the phantasmatic world of a woman, portrayed as a fashion model and her friend - a hermaphrodite (we discover this in the end of the video story when the (plastic) phallus in between her legs shows up). The model on the other side is apparently a transvestite, switching sex easily through language. They remember their childhood, the years in school and the first experience with masturbation. The visual story in the video presents the confrontation of the model with her photographs and slides. She is playing "live" for the camera, while she is restaging her poses on the photographs, projected in the back. The model is posing, while we follow to the text of the song *The Model* (the original lyrics by Kraftwerk interpreted by Snakefinger).<sup>2</sup>

The video re-uses and applies in its lighting, camera and editing the aesthetics from the German and American avant-garde traditions from 1960s and 1970s, referring to Fassbinder, Von Praunheim and Warhol. The performance in front of the camera points toward politics of sexuality and female pleasure.<sup>3</sup> It is possible for this work to be seen as one of the first, if not the first, video in the world which opens up and dramatises the institutions of masculinity through drag and king practices under socialism! It can be seen as a clear political statement in favour of lesbians through queer optics. The clear political performative stance toward these issues in the video entailed

## dig me out

the de-stabilization of binary systems of power and as well of the cinematic apparatus and its history. We can examine how seemingly Western models (we were referring to the underground film, music and visual history in the 1960s and 1970s) that were reconstructed and re-performed in socialism could tackle the institution of history, sexuality and politics on a larger scale.

With the song by Yello Pin ball cha cha, and the singer singing "Come, come closer to me, I tell you man you will see..." inviting the public to watch, we enter into the dance for the camera in the 1983 video The Threat of the Future (Groznja prihodnosti) by The Borders of Control No.4. The public is in relation to the dance as in a peep show; that is implying a pornographic public eye, but as well a constant pornographic perpetuation of our lives by law and mass media. Instead of the Foucauldian society of discipline, contemporary societies with media commercials and spectacles, as was announced by Guy Debord, will control us, devouring our lives, shaping our needs, teasing our desires.

Therefore in the video we get a duplication of performing: in front of the camera, as in some kind of cinema vérité, we have the female performers talking about their sexual lives and lesbian attitudes, while at the same time we see them as well performing in a night show on the TV behind them. The TV erotic night show within the video is dubbed with one of songs by the first all women (post)punk band in ex-Yugoslavia The Raid in the Clinic Mercator (Racija v kliniki Mercator, where "Mercator" is the leading Slovenian supermarket chain). The TV erotic night show only has subtitles: "D'ya think I'm sexy"; "You Lost that Loving Feeling"; „Take me, I'm Yours." The last part of the video opens with a full screen text "Capital's punishment," following by a dialogue of the performers in the bathroom. They exchange thoughts about a politically motivated

## dig me out

prosecution in the 1980s in relation to punk fanzines and the imprisonment of some punks being declared Nazi punks in socialism.<sup>4</sup>

The video is about creating spaces that deconstruct hegemonic rules and police domination that was exercised all over from sexual to civil rights. It is also about the formation of new spaces for contestation and finding new locations (from bedrooms to bathrooms and police station) for formulating agencies. If socialism effectively prevented people from claiming public spaces which were in effect owned by the party elite, then it was necessary to re-construct other public spaces. It was also possible to do this by reclaiming history and sexuality, which in turn generated spaces of resistance against the ideological and political, patriarchal and institutions of power.

Tamara Alleyne-Dettmers in her essay *Body Politics: Reconstructing Woman Power in the Celebration of Carnival*, calls similar strategies "body politics," I will go a step further and say that they are developing the politics of subjectivity by asking „who [the fuck] is the political subject?<sup>5</sup>

In the 1980s, projects with feminist undertones took place in Slovenia, but it should be noted that those were primarily women's groups bound to the experience of the punk movement, which however did not expose solely and only their feminist standpoints, but used femininity to operate inside the hard core of the punk rock discourse, emphasizing more the criticism of the socialist world that was against everything and everybody and therefore also against feminist's concepts. Feminist premises in art and the hard-core lesbian experience: this issue has not been widely discussed in Slovenia or generally, in the east European territories. This kind of

## dig me out

artistic action, together with its social and political experience, supposedly belonged to some other territory - usually to the capitalist West and its discourse of political correctness.

Indeed, a change of perspective occurred in the 1990s through numerous projects in the field of performance and contemporary art along with new political and, I will add, queer contextualisation of the body and identity. At the end of the 1990s, Ljubljana finally met Eclipse, the artistic duo involved in hard sexual and erotic statements and performance activities, which opened the door wider for women with a desire to perform. Eclipse is a female duo, one "she" from the duo is always performing in front of the camera, as the kitschy porno-functional body, while the other "she" is behind the camera. The body in Eclipse is constantly being produced through performative actions. In Eclipse's photograph entitled Blood is Sweeter Than Honey, from the series Pornorama (2001), artists as Koons, Cronenberg, Almodovar, Abramovic, Chapman Brothers, Sprinkle, Madonna, Athey, Saudek, Newton and Clayderman, already claimed through the capitalist art market, which regulates and distributes the selling and consumption of images, certain parts of the body. The photograph shows the names of these artists imprinted onto those parts of the body that is "owned" or "branded" by them through the art institutions and the market. The result is to show that the master artist, each with her or his cannibalistic attitude toward one part of the body, loses part of her or his priority and originality precisely by being dismantled by such Eclipse's parodying of models of femininity and masculinity from the high arts field that are furthermore displayed as popular trashy post-socialist doubles.

Similar logic of displaying trashy post-socialist doubles is used in The Butterfly Story I, which we made in 1994, by Marina

## dig me out

Grzinic and Aind Smid. Its is a video which takes us to China, where we "encounter" Mao Zedong's wife, Jiang Qing (as a member of the "Gang of Four" during the Cultural Revolution), and a famous Chinese dissident from the 1980s, whom Grzinic and Smid "set in motion" (they discovered him on a piece of film in the TV Slovenia archives as a voiceless "discard"). Grzinic and Smid wanted to double the liaison, so they visualized Chairman Mao's erotic dreams, thus imagining a love affair with Theda Bara, the movies' first femme fatale. In this video, our dreams of distant lands, of escape from our zero dimension, are realized through an inversion of time and space, and we see the enormous effect made possible by technologically reversing the linearity of time: playing something backwards can sometimes be the best way to portray our feelings and thoughts. Using this method Grzinic and Smid show that video cannot be separated from contemporary ideology and the queer space of politics and sexuality. Indeed, through the medium of video, ideology can be utilized, presented, and structured as a conceptual and powerful queer tool.

Indeed, it is a position essentially different from the one in the 1980s. We should not forget that in the 1980s it was important to retake formally the position of the other, to declare the position of the other as a proper one! We were therefore declaring ourselves as lesbians, gays, Albanians, Southerners, because we fought for the "thing" and demanded equal rights, for all those regarded as the Others, including ourselves. To accept the position or the fate of the other was a clear political decision. Today however, it seems that representing others, just representing her state of the thing is no longer enough; what is important is the re-articulation, replaying, and to re-performance one's own true position. I am who I am and I would like to articulate it by myself. I am a lesbian, I am a Southerner. This is exactly who we are and

## dig me out

nothing else and - as Jamika Ajalon<sup>6</sup> asked publicly - "who the fuck are you?"

## References

Alleyne-Dettmers, P. T.: Body Politics: Reconstructing Woman Power in the Celebration of Carnival, In: Shedhalle Newspaper, No. 02, Zürich 2005, p. 7-10

Grzinic, M.: Strategies of Visualization and the Aesthetics of Video in the New Europe. In: Lengel, L. (ed.): Culture and Technology in the New Europe: Civic Discourse in Transformation in Post-Communist Nations, Stamford 2000, p. 195-219

Grzinic, M.: Fiction Reconstructed. Post Socialism and the Retro-Avant Garde. Vienna 2000

Grzinic, M.: Situated Contemporary Art Practices. Ljubljana: ZRC SAZU / Frankfurt a. M. 2004

Grzinic, M. / Eisenstein, A. (eds.): Spectralization of Technology: From Cyberfeminism to Elsewhere and Back. Maribor 1999

Grzinic, M. / Eisenstein, A. (eds.): The Body Caught in the Intestines of the Computer, Women Strategies or Strategies by Women. Maribor / Ljubljana 2000

## Notes

The essay was first published in Female Consequences. Feminismus. Antirassismus. Popmusik. Rosa Reitsamer / Rupert Weinzierl (eds.), Vienna: Löcker 2006



---

<sup>1</sup> The group consisted of the following members: Barbara Borcic, Marina Grzinic, Dusan Mandic and Aina Smid.

<sup>2</sup> "For every camera, she gives the best she can / I even saw her on the cover of a magazine / Now she's a big success I want to see her again." (The Model, original lyrics by Kraftwerk)

<sup>3</sup> "You know what happened to me? When I was in the seventh grade of primary school...Once, when I was in the cellar, our neighbor came and asked me, if I had masturbated. And I didn't know at all what it was all about. I was completely surprised and then he wanked it off. And from then on I masturbated daily." (From the video The Icons of Glamour, Echoes of Death, 1982)

<sup>4</sup> "And about the fanzine, did they ask anything about it? Yes, they did. Not directly, though. I told them that I had finished with it, that I had been looking for a job, and then he asked me how on earth we could expect to get a job. I asked why, what's the problem? He said, well considering what you've been doing. I said what do you meant by that, punk or what? He said you know very well how the things were with the fanzine. Then you get completely paranoid. Someone phones you and you get the feeling, the fix idea they are recording your conversations. Because it is clear that they know everything, from round tables to everything you have ever said, literal quotations, everything is written down. And all this time the guy is telling you that he's not talking to you officially, but privately as a friend. Like I am at the police station, exchanging with friends. Come on, bullshit. In fact you get an official call and you know perfectly well that the guy is a policeman. Shit." (From the video "The Threat of the Future," 1983)

<sup>5</sup> With „who is the [fucking] political subject?" I am referring as well to a performance music lecture by Jamika Ajalon, July 2005, Cornerhouse, Manchester, where is posed a similar question to the public „who the fuck are you?"

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.