



Body, Gender and Transnationalism: Art and Cultural Criticism in a Changing Europe

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Abstract

The term transnationalism, dealing with all facets of immigration – refugees, foreign workers, illegal layovers and migrants from one country to another – has been one of the prominent topics on the public and political agenda of most Western countries in recent years. Through analysing several visual works, this article seeks to draw out the influence of economic, political and cultural changes upon a range of female artists in post-communist countries today. These artists each react differently in their works to the globalisation processes and the major transitions to a capitalistic economy, from a critical and personal point of view. As a result, these artists create what I shall call ‘a polyphonic project’, which is a product of Central and Eastern European artists that set out, and indeed succeeded, to reclaim their voice and body as women, challenging questions of gender, nationality, politics and economy in a changing Europe.

The term transnationality, which refers to the various manifestations of immigration – e.g. immigrants, foreign workers, illegal immigrants and migrants – has become prominent on the political agenda of most Western countries in recent years. The fact that migration has gained such impetus can be attributed to a number of causes, including increased mobility resulting from greater accessibility to modes of transport; the growing gap between the industrialised world and developing countries; and local and regional violent conflict, such as in Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq or Indonesia, which often results in large refugee populations adrift without home or even state.

When the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, Eastern and Central European countries gradually rid themselves of their communist regimes. The subsequent profound sociopolitical changes in the region affected every aspect of citizens’ lives. Alongside the shift to democracy came another change, no less important, from a socialist to a capitalist economy. Although these changes have been discussed extensively in the literature from social, historical and cultural perspectives,¹ little attention has been focused on the question of how these changes are expressed in the field of the visual arts. By analysing several visual works, this article seeks to outline the influence of the above changes on a range of

female artists currently working in post-communist countries. Each of these artists reacts differently to the globalisation processes and the transition to a capitalistic economy, from both a critical and personal point of view. The result is what I shall call 'a polyphonic project', a product of Central and Eastern European artists who have set out, and indeed are succeeding, to reclaim their voice and body as women, challenging questions of gender, nationality, politics and economy in a changing Europe.²

One result of the collapse of the iron curtain was a significant transformation in the patterns and proportions of emigration to EEC countries. Given that it became easier to move between East and West, there was a surge of emigrants who were escaping the low level of living in the East. Tens of thousands slipped illegally across borders or never returned home after their holiday visas expired, hoping to find a new country and reinvent themselves in the well-established West. The 'host' countries in the EEC, for their part, had a hard time finding adequate ways of coping with this phenomenon and the problems it brought in its wake. As a consequence, official policy concerning immigration is shifting constantly. One reason for the host countries' ambivalence towards immigration is that the phenomenon is complex, with both positive and negative aspects. For instance, we should not forget that immigration does not just benefit the immigrant who is looking for a better life, it also serves the hosting society: thus, for instance, countries characterised by a rapidly ageing population need immigrants to fill the ranks and rejuvenate and replenish the workforce (Malmberg 2006:52). Only this will make it possible to pay pensions for an ever-growing section of the population. Countries whose economy is in recession tend to gain by an influx of immigrants – whether they fill jobs that the locals consider low-status, like construction work, care for the sick and elderly, farming or cleaning, or whether they are highly schooled experts like medical, technological or IT personnel (Shohat 1998:50).

In spite of these obvious advantages, immigration often arouses opposition in the hosting societies. This opposition tends to come from 'below', in the sense that it evolves at the personal level, where the private citizen feels that 'the neighbourhood is changing beyond recognition'.³ Veteran citizens feel that their hegemony comes under threat as the population changes, often at great speed.⁴ This is especially the case where immigrants settle in enclaves of their own and do not show an interest in becoming assimilated to the local culture. Other factors further contribute to the fear of and aversion against immigrants, for instance rising unemployment figures – even though it is well known that most immigrants tend to be employed in jobs that local people would not occupy anyway. Such fears have recently led to the rise of populist right-wing political parties (e.g. in Denmark, the Netherlands and Portugal) that advocate against immigrants and the rate of immigration to their countries.⁵

Immigration from the East to Western Europe, its roots and its implications, are at the very centre of public attention in the whole of Europe, a preoccupation reflected in the visual arts that is produced in these places.⁶ Throughout the Cold War, the countries 'behind' the iron curtain were in the grip of a totalitarian communist ideology that dominated every aspect of their lives. Artists, too, were

expected to 'toe the line' and create only what was required and approved by the regime. All this changed when, in the 1990s, these communist regimes collapsed.

Nationalism and civic identity and their influence on private identity are frequent themes in the work of female artists in Eastern Europe, particularly in a region that has recently undergone great trauma and transformation such as the Balkans. Tanja Ostojic (b. 1972) is a Serbian-born multidisciplinary artist and social activist, whose works deal with immigration (legal and illegal), women's mobility and relocation across Europe, and with the effects of unification and globalisation on European citizens. Now residing in Berlin, Ostojic works on projects throughout Europe that question power relations from the point of view of a female immigrant. Her art-research projects combine a variety of media, including advertising, video, photography, flyers, posters, interactive internet projects, installations and performances, dynamic workshops, and meals during which discussions are held that are open to the public. The artist thus investigates questions concerning power on the geopolitical level, questions about gender and ethnicity – usually with recourse to her own, private body and referring to her personal history.

Looking for a Husband with a EU Passport (2000) gave expression to Ostojic's total dedication to the effort of obtaining a German residence permit. Ostojic published her own photograph on a website that took the shape of a virtual auction. In the accompanying text she wrote that she was looking for a man in possession of European citizenship who would be prepared to marry her. The photograph shows her fully exposed, naked, all body hair removed, frontally facing the potential-male-client-viewer (see Figure 1). The result was a huge influx of offers, among which the artist selected, eventually, a German man who was a European passport holder. One rushed meeting in her own country, on an open field, followed by a modest wedding in Berlin – occasions from which she also created an installation – achieved her wish to emigrate to Germany. These were the raw materials with which Ostojic started out to make her art. Her works reflect and describe the clash between extreme poverty and isolation in the country of origin, and the policy of marginalisation that Europe conducts towards immigrants – all of which are harder and more complex for women.⁷

While showing herself like this, naked and shaved like merchandise, is shocking for the spectators, and must have been hard for the artist herself, this presentation also has a subversive side: it is full of humor, deeply ironic, self-conscious and open-eyed. It is full of contradictions, this body image of Ostojic. Beyond being exposed and 'perverse', it is also funny; as the artist commented in an interview, she consciously uses humour.⁸ Cultural critic Linda Hutcheon has, indeed, argued that the use of humour can help to subvert fossilised cultural values. A unique type of 'weapon', humour takes certain freedoms vis-a-vis received moral, social and economical values. Humour 'knows' about the society's weak spots and thrives at exactly those places where the voice of authority stammers, losing its bearing – at the hesitant sites of cultural repression. It offers itself as excessive beyond the semantic field and is expert at linguistic manipulation (Hutcheon 2002:97).

Ostojic frequently uses humour as a way of coping. She parodies the female body and its modes of seduction and this is effective as empowerment; never-

Figure 1. Tanja Ostojic, *Looking for a Husband with a EU Passport* (2000).



theless, in the case of this work, it is unclear how wholeheartedly the spectators are supposed to laugh.

By means of the same humour, the artist construes herself as a hybrid creature. Like many others in her position, this woman, in order to become a free subject, must develop special tactics aimed to generate a positive self-image. Subjects like themselves, who migrate from Eastern to Western Europe, bear no resemblance to the powerful Western subject who owns the desirable 'right' passport, connoting a more comfortable, better life. They are considered, in their own eyes as in the eyes of others, hybrid creatures; a combination of both of these worlds. This sense of being imprisoned between two worlds is exactly what Ostojic's work reflects.

One of the main issues in the cultural criticism of Edward Said is exactly this hybrid state characteristic of people who come from different cultures and who

experience these different worlds simultaneously. He argues that he holds in great esteem those intellectuals from the so-called Third World who migrated, or were expelled, to the modern metropolis on a journey he calls 'the voyage in' (Said 2004:89). As she or he 'crosses the border', the 'uprooted', post-colonial critic (or artist, as in Ostojic's case) escapes the hardships that national critics suffer in the developing world. Such a critic, placed on both sides of the fence simultaneously, achieves a maximum view. The same can be said about Ostojic: she is an Eastern European woman, from the wrong side of the map, who is trying consciously to stimulate a discussion concerning her position as a woman in Eastern Europe. At the same time, however, she is also a subject who is equipped with a new, unblinkered vision, deeply Western. Both of these angles are exploited and expressed in this work of art, as in many of her other creations.

In Ostojic's work the notion of the 'subjective agent' takes an important place, referring to the interrelations between subject and power structures. If a person wishes to construe herself as a subject, she will have to demand the power to act and make her voice heard. In the context of art, what this implies is attaching oneself to the aesthetic and social structures that make up the art establishment in such a way as to create a cultural voice that has a certain impact. Until the 1980s, it was not easy for artists who were not of North American or Western European extraction to become connected to the centres of power. There was a tendency to receive their work in terms of their difference from the 'mainstream' rather than on the strength of their artistic value. The more this type of art included familiar and stereotypical ethnic signs, the more easily assimilable it was while it was also being kept at a 'safe' distance, as so-called 'exotic' work. Therefore, Ostojic's work can also be understood against the background of art critic Jean Fisher's analysis of the work of the Afro-British artist Yinka Shonibare. In his work *Alien Obsessives, Mum, Dad and the Kids* (1998), for example, he uses African batik fabric in constructing a strange-looking group of sculptures in order to convey the idea of the alien, the foreigner, the outsider, the 'other', or in his own words: '[it] is rooted in a fear of the unknown, the unfamiliar that does not dress or look like us' (Bruschi 2001:101). Fisher argues that the challenge of the non-White artist is to be accepted equally and actively. The mainstream establishment, from its side, has tried to approach this by evolving a notion of cultural diversity (Fisher 2002). Sarat Maharaj has called this the 'struggle for difference', a struggle that in no way reflects either respect for or acceptance of the culture of the other (Maharaj 2000:34). Indeed, both Ostojic and Shonibare's artistic activities are marked by a refusal to maintain the aforementioned 'safe distance'. Ostojic 'crosses the border', or trespasses, into forbidden territory, but in doing so she applies humour, wit, artistic skill, irresistible seduction – and most of all she relies on the insight that the 'outsider' is always already inside. Her humorous provocation works on repressed histories, and on the instability of contemporary assumptions about the position of marginalised subjects. Situated, as it were, outside the hegemonic culture, their presence renders the instability of the hegemonic social structure visible and audible; a structure that tends to forge its identity by excluding and delimiting the 'other' who is always already inside.

The theme of immigrants who are trying to cross from East to West returns frequently in Ostojic's work. One of these, the performance *Crossing Over*,

Figure 2. Tanja Ostojic, *Crossing Over* (2000).



addresses EU policies regarding illegal immigrants who infiltrate borders in an attempt to ensure a better future on the Western side of the continent. This performance began in 2001, when Ostojic was planning to travel to Austria in order to participate in an artist's workshop and her visa application was rejected. She then transformed this rejection into an art project: with the aid of some Austrian friends she 'stole' the borderline, documenting all stages of this activity along with her own responses at the time (*cf.* Figure 2). The final art product included images of the journey and written reflections on it that were then put on a website, plus responses from people across the world who were invited to comment. *Crossing Over* is the name for all of this material as it appears 'live' on the website and as it continues to grow and evolve on the internet.

Ostojic's use of the internet as a tool for conveying the 'theft' of the border is a brilliant manoeuvre because it enables her to accurately approach her subject matter. The internet offers possibilities whereby information is absorbed rapidly and distributed instantaneously worldwide. Thus intellectual materials are dispersed freely, something that was totally impossible in the not-so-distant past under the communist regimes (and indeed, beyond it, whenever entry visas are refused in the so-called 'free world'). Therefore, in this artistic performance Ostojic does not simply move physically between borders, but in the new age of virtual technologies her ideas and artistic products travel across borders too. This is the ultimate conceptual achievement of an act that expresses liberation: she sees the internet, indeed, as the emancipatory medium par excellence, devoid of nationality or citizenship, without spiritual parentage, where one can express one's self uncensored.⁹ The internet, in her eyes, is not dominated by a repressive regime, it lacks rules and regulations, there is no risk of sanctions or exile. Devoid of an oppressive history of colonialism or gender-based repression, it does not incline towards any particular geopolitical centre either. The internet is the global era's overarching international 'state'. People who in the not-so-remote past were

subject to surveillance and brutal oppression are now able to express themselves without any fear of reprisal. A poor, non-privileged subject, Ostojic has found a way to exploit the internet as a subversive tool that enables her to speak about stealing and crossing borders. The piece *Crossing Over* evokes the theory of critic and poet Gloria Anzaldua, who writes cultural criticism about borders and identity. In her seminal text *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), she examines the condition of Chicano and Latino women in White American society. Describing how she worked from the age of 11 as a migrant worker, and next in the family fields throughout high school and college, Anzaldua, through a combination of history and personal narrative, allows the reader a view into a life of alienation and isolation as a prisoner caught in the borderlands between cultures. The book, divided into two sections – prose and poetry – effectively takes readers from every race, culture or nation on a journey, as she insists that while these borders are sometime abstract, they should never be implemented into the soul.

It should also be mentioned, in the context of Ostojic's *Crossing Over* project, that over and beyond the immediate, directly economical factors, there are other factors that may drive a woman to migrate. As Ehrenreich and Hochschild noted, women from post-communist countries can use migration to escape an environment that expects them to look after their ageing relatives; to surrender their wages to a father or husband; or to remain respectful to an abusive husband. Sometimes, too, women migrate as a result of a failed marriage and a wish to start a new life in another, exciting place (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2006:20).

Ostojic's work constitutes a direct response to the situation of women in these times of change in Europe and during this period of transnationality. *Looking for a Husband with a EU Passport*, *Crossing Over* and *Integration Project* (2003–05), as well as other performances and projects, reflect the harsh reality in which female residents of former Eastern Bloc countries have to obtain visas – often via dubious routes – in order to enter prosperous EU countries.

Born in Belgrade, the capital of former Yugoslavia, Ostojic witnessed the collapse of her country and the subsequent, tragic outcome for the entire region during the shameful regime of Slobodan Milosevic. She carries the trauma into her new country of residence but has to hide it in an attempt to appear normal. No-one can be trusted to be considerate and patient as she tries to adjust and become a 'regular' citizen. This process is hard for anyone, but even more so for a woman who carries the scars of Milosevic's regime.

Her recent work often constitutes an attempt to record personal experiences and investigations that hinge on her being a female immigrant in Germany; that is, in Western Europe and no longer a woman who lives in the Eastern Bloc.

One of the most effective projects by artist Milica Tomic (b. 1960) – who, like Ostojic, was born in Serbia and works there to this day – is a piece of video art entitled *I Am Milica Tomic* (1999). This video deals with national and gender identity (see Figure 3). Screened as a loop, the piece shows the artist repeating her name, each time in a different language, and each time presenting herself as having a different nationality – German, Spanish, Slovakian, Danish, British and so on. As she does so, her beautiful body is gradually covered by wounds and cuts, turning into an increasingly bloody mess. After some minutes, the film ends

Figure 3. Milica Tomic, *I am Milica Tomic*, (1999).



abruptly and restarts at the beginning; Tomic, once more, is a whole, beautiful, unblemished woman, and the process of destruction resumes – endlessly.

If we want to understand this work we must know that the artist's private name – Milica – was unusual at a time when her country (Yugoslavia) was undergoing modernisation. It is an ancient, mediaeval name (Kotik 2007:160). As she was growing up, during the great nationalist waves of the 1980s, her name, which referred to sensitive phases in the national narrative, drew much attention. While only part of her private experience (as a Christian Serb) during childhood, in adulthood her name became associated with national issues of identity, leading her to address the ethnic tragedy and ongoing conflict of the Balkan countries in this project. Against this background, we can understand the film in terms of the tight connection between the private woman and her identity as part of her torn nation. What is unclear in the video is by what means the cuts and wounds are being inflicted or indeed by whom, or do they somehow come about spontaneously, emanating from the body (in this region, particularly severe crimes were committed against women in special torture and abuse camps, all in the name of so-called 'ethnic cleansing'). When the artist makes her key statement about herself ('I am Milica Tomic, I am Spanish/Danish/British [or otherwise]'), she is not in fact in the position to state her real nationality. She was born in, and has the nationality of, a country that no longer exists (Yugoslavia).

Another, no less effective, project by Tomic, addressing the same subject matter, was selected to represent her country at the 2003 Venice Biennale (see Figure 4). This work consists of visual representations and written text:

Imagine you wake up one morning and your country has disappeared. Your bed and the house are the same and your neighborhood is, almost, the same, but your neighbors seem to have changed and the city is changing even as you get out of bed. On the news a man that you do not recognise is making an inaugural presidential speech, introducing a flag and national anthem you do not recognise and he is speaking about a country, yours, that you do not know. Very soon you will begin to change as well, for with this shift everything from your religion to your education, your understanding of your family and basically your entire value system will be influenced by the

Figure 4. Milica Tomic, *Front of 'national pavilion', Venice Biennale (2003).*



changes outside and effect [sic] you in ways you could not even begin to imagine last night. In less than a decade, you will notice yourself speaking in a different accent and addressing the world in a different manner than your mother taught you and soon you will not even recognise yourself and the transformation will be complete. (Geers 2003:4)

This text, which appeared in the formal site of the Biennale, is not a scary script taken from a science-fiction movie or a popular novel, it reflects the true, painful reality as experienced by many men and women at the end of the Cold War. Citizens of countries like Yugoslavia, East Germany and the Soviet Union had to undergo extreme experiences, including actual adjustments of geographical borders. As a result they often felt disoriented, physically and psychologically, for months and even years after the revolutions that took place in their countries. Tomic chose to convey this experience effectively by installing hundreds of high-voltage light bulbs on the outer walls of Yugoslavia's Biennale pavilion. When lighting up, all together, these bulbs would momentarily blind spectators – a metaphor for the great sensitiveness, pain and disorientation of so many people in the Balkans (see detail in Figure 4).

Interestingly, Tomic, who was representing her country (Serbia and Montenegro), markedly preferred to use the country's former name on the pavilion's façade: Yugoslavia – her no-longer-existing country (throughout the Biennale the pavilion was referred to by that name). Smadar Lavie and Ted Swedenburg, both anthropologists, explain in their book *Displacement, Diaspora, and Geographies of Identity*: 'Movements of migration caused the notion of culture based on the transmutation of race into cultural relativism, a notion that immutably ties a culture

to a fixed terrain, to become increasingly problematic' (Lavie and Swedenburg 2001:4). These processes have led to a kind of postmodernist fragmentation, in which identity becomes an infinite interplay of possibilities. However, many minorities, exiles, diasporas and other marginal groups understood not only what historical difference is, but also how difference operates and protested about the ability of the privileged 'to exoticize themselves selectively' (Lubiano 1991:155–56). Hence displacement, we learn, is not experienced in precisely the same way across time and space. Nor, on the other hand, are postmodern critiques of modernity entirely 'new', for as Wahneema Lubiano has reminded us, 'at least three hundred and fifty years ago some of us were already in training to be both cynical about the Enlightenment and less than optimistic about modernism' (1991:156).

With the fall of communism, societies that for decades had been deprived of commodities and in which private property was extremely rare experienced a fast-growing consumerist trend. Although the majority of women had to continue working hard in order to support themselves, the order of the day, according to cultural critic Charlotte Kotik, was to be fashionable and fitted out like Western women (Kotik 2007:154). Thus, in her 2001 photograph series entitled *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*,¹⁰ Boryana Rossa (b. 1972) shows a new kind of Eastern European woman: arrogant, cynical, materialistic, someone who is interested solely in herself and in what is good for her. The woman, who is extremely beautiful and appears in carefully chosen, fashionable Western clothes, is photographed as she takes possession of various household items, pieces of furniture or vases from homes that she visits and then leaves, abandoning the men inside them (see Figure 5). However, a closer look reveals that this 'new woman' is acting against a background of old houses, shabby, decaying apartments and buildings, creating a striking dissonance between this and her own glamorous appearance. Indeed, this woman, stuck between two cultures, is a hybrid creature. She is inhabited by different, often disparate cultures.

We should remember that although hybridity is a theoretical concept that has generated much theoretical activity, especially in the field of postcolonial studies, it represents a daily reality of absolutely concrete practices. The notion describes how individuals and communities cope with daily conflicts; conflicts that relate to their being under a regulating cultural gaze that requires a unified identity and

Figure 5. Boryana Rossa, *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (2001).



unambiguousness. Yet for many, this singular and rigged identity determination is not relevant because within them coexist several identities at the same time.

Contemporary hybrid discourse looks at intermediate states from an assumption that a critical discourse that limits itself to binary categories reduces our grasp of the full spectrum of cultural possibilities (Shmueloff *et al.* 2007:6). Hybrid desire opens new possibilities for action, encourages subversive practices and the creation of new identity categories. Hybrid existence is tentative, requiring practices of cover-up and exposure, an appearance that each time emphasises a different aspect of identity – in accordance with the relevant expectation of the social context. This kind of existence, by its very definition, clashes with the concept of identity. When a body is responsive to contradictory identity demands, it will have to render itself as a constantly transforming type of performance in which it externalises a different element of its identity each time, thereby negating other, opposing ones. Rather than constituting a theoretical elaboration, this is a theatrical praxis of living that occurs in spite of itself, because the person needs to achieve public visibility. This praxis links the option of visibility with basic assumptions, fantasies and narratives that are connected to each of the respective identity aspects separately. In their ambiguity, though, hybrid subjects form a threat to the hegemonic society because they do not fit into any one category. Dynamic, unstable, full of paradox and essentially performative, the hybrid subject each time declares a different segment of self. The scholar most closely associated with the term hybridity is, of course, Homi Bhabha. He used it extensively, especially in his seminal book *The Location of Culture From 1994*, in which he wrote:

Hybridity is a problematic presentation and individuation that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that other ‘denied’ knowledges enter the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority ... This partializing process of hybridity is best described as a metonymy of presence. (Bhabha 1994:114–15)

The personality that Rossa presents in the present work is split, paradoxical, partial and strategic – just as Donna Haraway defined it (Haraway 1991:155). Homi Bhabha also coined the term ‘third space’, by which he meant that:

The intervention of the third space of enunciation, which makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process, destroys the mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is customarily revealed as integrated, open, expanding code. Such an intervention challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenising, unifying force, authenticated by an originary past, kept alive in the national tradition of the people [...] The non-synchronous temporality of global and national cultures opens up a cultural space – a third space – where the negotiation of incommensurable differences creates a tension peculiar to borderline existences. Hybrid hyphenisations emphasise the incommensurable elements as the basis of cultural identities. (Bhabha 1994:37, 218)

Contemporary feminist discourse rejects an essentialist notion of femininity, acknowledging the fact that the entity we call 'woman' is construed from various facets, including the self, gender, race, class, religion, etc, which are unstable and interrelate in changing ways. Therefore, the hybrid subject may act inconsistently, depending on context and on the people with whom she or he is interacting. This, of course, has a real potential to constitute a carnivalesque subversion of the usual distinctions that make it possible for the 'identity parade' to continue. Thus it is not surprising that the hybrid subject, who by definition exceeds her or his appointed place, is often perceived as dangerous and even scandalous.

The seemingly contemporary woman whom we encounter in Boryana Rossa's photographs is not really liberated from her original culture and environment. These old, decrepit buildings associate with the old communist regime; the artist has situated the 'modern' woman against this background in order to remind us that things in Eastern Europe have not improved all that drastically, especially not for women. In an interview, Rossa explained that this project came to convey the crisis of femininity in her region in the wake of communism.¹¹ She further explained that the women who appear in the different photographs of the series, tempted by the seductions of capitalism to which they had recently become exposed, offered their bodies in an attempt to improve their financial situation. These are women who decided that they were not interested in regular jobs or studies. Well aware of their beauty, they could use their bodies to find 'supportive' men. They did this in full consciousness and instrumentally, albeit at times with a heavy heart, said Rossa.

While Boryana Rossa opened the discussion concerning the Eastern European woman who finds herself forced by circumstance to use her body in order to make a living and improve her difficult economic situation to a relatively minor extent, Ann Sofi Siden (b. 1962), born and living in Western Europe,¹² has bravely created explicit and blunt video art on the same issue. In her ongoing video project entitled *Warte Mal! [Hey Wait!]* (2002), she documented a community of women whose existence most of us would prefer to ignore. Siden dedicated nine and a half months to create this project when she moved to the small border town of Dubi, situated between the Czech Republic and Germany. The one claim to fame of this obscure little town is the lively sex industry that has evolved, where sex workers parade the town's main street at all hours of the day in search of 'clients' who obviously are not simply passing through but come for this particular purpose. When Siden arrived in the town, she befriended the women and talked with them, as well as with the men who looked for their services. She even spoke with the women's procurers and put all of this on video. Once she had edited the materials, she presented them as an installation that travelled the main cities of Europe between 2002 and 2003. The exhibit's title derives from the phrase the women use to draw possible clients' attention, as the latter drive by in their cars: *warte mal!* Often, these are the only German words they know. There is a lot of competition, the sex workers told Siden. Most of the women are poor Czechs who have ended up prostituting themselves as the result of, for instance, serious economic hardship, illness of a relative, an urgent need to escape a violent husband, a dream of leaving behind their current lives and start with a 'clean page' in the West.

Siden's installation is large and complex and requires a long visit of some hours. Constructed as a sequence of 'stations', the installation requires the spectator to watch, at each station, a 15-minute video recording of a conversation with a pimp, a local police officer, a 'client' or one of the female sex workers. Because it takes the form of a labyrinth, the installation offers the spectator a complex emotional experience that may approach – however incompletely – the difficult and conflicting feelings of a woman who stands every day, sometimes for years, on the road, in the same town, knowing that she may never manage to struggle out of this situation. The stations take the shape of small cell-like units, reminding us – according to art critic Steve Penn – of peep shows, thus adding to the spectator's discomfort. It is as if they too take part in the moral transgression (Penn 2002).

Ever since the collapse of the Communist Bloc in 1989, there has been a flood of academic studies and often heart-rending media coverage on the subject of the trafficking of women in Europe (mostly from East to West, although also within the East as such) (Berman 2003:40). In her study, bitinglly entitled *The 'Natasha Trade': Transnational Sex Trafficking* (2001), Donna Hughes writes that:

For decades, the primary sending countries were in Asia. But the collapse of the Soviet Union opened up a pool of millions of women from which traffickers can recruit. Former Soviet republics such as Belarus, Latvia, Moldova, Russia and Ukraine have become major suppliers of women to sex industries all over the world. (Hughes 2001:9)

Transnational sex trafficking is a global industry with an estimated annual turnover of anything between 7 and 12 billion dollars, and over a million women from these regions are joining every year. For its entrepreneurs, this profitable industry is relatively risk-free compared to other forms of illegal trading, like in arms or drugs, and hence is quite attractive. Spreading their international net, the pimps entice women and even seduce naive young girls who are hoping to find work and personal progress.

The term trafficking in women refers to the transfer of women within or across national borders for the purpose of sexual exploitation. It may involve the use of (sometimes physical) force, persuasion, manipulation, misinformation, abuse of authority, family pressure (whether psychological or physical), economic deprivation or other forms of inequality that women encounter. In the past decade alone, the number of women from Eastern and Central Europe who have become caught up in trafficking reaches into the hundreds of thousands (Hughes 2001:9).

A 'minor' problem at its outset (the first signs of a burgeoning trade in women for the sex industry occurred in the former Soviet Union during the *perestroika* period in the mid-1980s, with the opening of international borders), the phenomenon grew as more and more countries joined the EU. In considering it we must take into account the social change caused by the rise of the new economy and globalisation. The countries of the EU have been responding ever more rigidly, through legislation and penalisation of the procurers who are involved in organised crime (and of women in the sex trade). A whole new vocabulary has evolved, including terms like 'new-age labour' or 'white flesh'.

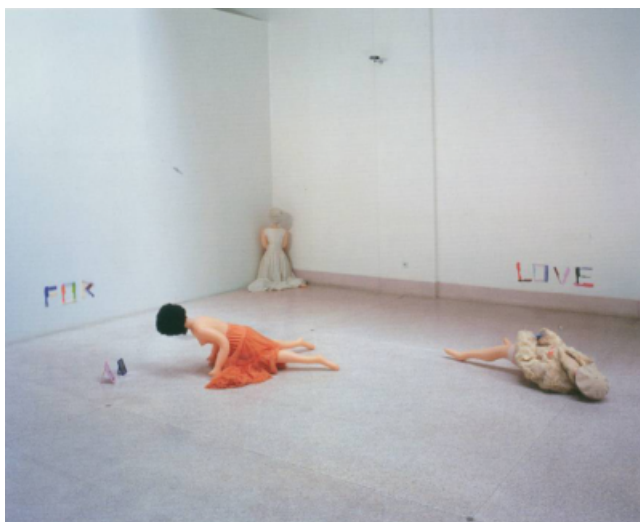
Although critics have argued that Foucault's theorising has been gender-blind, I would nevertheless attempt a Foucauldian analysis of the trafficking in women in the context of globalisation. If we consider the globalisation of the world economy as a form of disciplining, we can approach these matters with a view to method and power – Foucauldian terms par excellence (Foucault 1976). When we are looking at the international sex industry this approach allows us to avoid technical issues like 'who is transgressing against whom', who should be punished and how to repair the damage – and give, instead, more profound consideration to the question of how power structures and regulates the individual, controls him (or, in our case, her) and enmeshes her with the international sex industry. We may then argue that as a disciplining formation, globalisation reveals the real regime below the surface; or, in Elina Penttinen's words, 'globalization as a form of governmentality then reveals the underlying regime of truth or "deep system of meaning" of globalization of the world-economy' (Penttinen 2000:6).

The bio-power inflicted on the female human bodies that find themselves part of the international sex trade in a world that is undergoing an accelerated process of globalisation leads to the creation of a class of excluded, 'othered' women; moreover, these women are imagined, by their so-called clients, in terms of imaginary ideals that the latter apply without connection to the real women themselves. They transform into objects and are voided of their humanity in order to satisfy the bottomless consumerism of the new global economy (which, among other things, includes prostitution). Monolithic theoretical categories – like those of 'ethnicity' or 'gender' – are not sustainable under a Foucauldian analysis of power and collapse, yielding a more complex, progressive discourse that restructures and combines these and many other concepts.

Communist countries, argues Carlotta Kotik, were renowned for their rigid, puritan attitude towards sex. Therefore, one hallmark of the post-totalitarian age was a booming sex industry (Kotik 2007:155). According to her, female artists were among the first to criticise this phenomenon and ponder its cultural implications and what it meant vis-a-vis gender relations. Katrina Vincourova (b. 1968), for instance, an artist who lives and works in Prague, was one of those who responded to the growth in sex shops in her surroundings. She explained that her 2002 work, entitled *Love the Love Doll Jamie* (cf. Figure 6), was inspired by the opening of the first sex shop in her neighbourhood (Kotik 2007:165). In its window, the shop displayed life-size inflatable female dolls, which caused Vincourova a sense of revulsion and nausea but at the same time strongly aroused her interest. For her project, Vincourova acquired scores of inflatable women dolls and presented them in a way that would make them look somewhat less like objects, thus giving them a narrative, a context and a life, as it were, of their own.

To achieve this she started by dressing them up in various items that belonged to herself; if the dolls were eventually dressed only in part, and still showing parts of their bodies, it was not her intention to eliminate all traces of the real aim of their existence. All dolls were placed so that their eyes were averted from the public, giving them an embarrassed expression (one has its face turned to the wall; another's eyes are occluded by a large rimmed hat, yet another has her head bent toward the floor, etc). Nevertheless, some of the dolls made eye contact with the

Figure 6. Katrina Vincourova, *Love the Love Doll Jamie* (2002).



spectators – a human exchange – but only by means of small mirrors that were placed by the side of their faces. Their gaze could be caught only if the audience were willing to move close to the floor and put their eyes at a specific angle. Another tactic the artist used was the placement of the dolls in particular poses and positions. Instead of displaying them all in the same, predictable way, ready to be used sexually by men, Vincourova put them in positions that made them less accessible for sexual intercourse. Moreover, Vincourova also made sure that the gallery space in which the installation was exhibited was completely empty, removing any decorations, furniture or other objects by way of an allusion to the visual and material poverty that characterised the communist regime. One can think of Vincourova's work in relation to the theory of Chela Sandoval, especially as expressed in her book *Methodology of the Oppressed* (2000) where she seeks to theorise effective methods of opposition, survival and agency for formerly marginalised groups.¹³ What Sandoval has identified is a language, a rhetoric of resistance to postmodern cultural conditions. Movements that emerged in the post-Second World War era generated specific modes of oppositional consciousness, and out of these emerged a new activity of consciousness and linguistic practices she calls the 'methodology of the oppressed'. This methodology – born of the strains of the cultural and identity struggles that currently mark global exchange – holds out the possibility of a new historical moment, a new citizen-subject and a new form of alliance between consciousness and politics, Sandoval claims. Her theory has destabilising elements in which she demonstrates the benefits in order for all citizen-subjects, everywhere, to survive the postmodern world. Like Vincourova, she believes that surviving others in a dominant society should utilise every and any aspect of the dominant power in a subversive way in order to survive. Resistance to physical and mental oppression developed by subjects and marginalised peoples (here, sexually abused or objectified women) is one of the

central issues of post modernism discussed in her text. Sandoval explains this idea by saying:

Under conditions of colonialization, poverty, racism, gender or sexual subordination, dominated populations are often held away from comforts of the dominant ideology or ripped out of legitimised social narratives, in a process of power that places such constituencies in a very different position from which to view objects-in reality than other kinds of citizen-subjects. (Sandoval 2000:104)

She goes on to list ways in which such citizen-subjects resist oppression:

The skills they might develop include the ability to self consciously navigate modes of dominant consciousness, learning to interrupt the 'turnstile' that alternately reveals history, as against the dominant forms of masquerade that history can take, 'focusing on each separately', applying a 'formal method of reading', cynically but also un-cynically, and not only with the hope of surviving, but with a desire to create a better world. (Sandoval 2000:104)

In post-communist countries, women are still worse off than men and they suffer gender-based discrimination. Many of them are treated humiliatingly, as commodities. They confront insulting comments, and hints are made frequently to their supposedly loose morals. As we have seen, some of them become actually involved in the sex trade – either its local version or the one that transfers them cross-nationally. In some respects, this situation resembles the 'post-colonial situation' elsewhere in the world. Clearly, these women's predicament can only change significantly if we create new structures and mechanisms that aim to liberate women from their economic dependence. What is also needed urgently is a better understanding of both the commonalities and differences among women living in the various post-communist countries, cultures and racial populations (Mohanty 2003) – an objective that is at the forefront of the discourse of feminist multiculturalism. The need for support organisations and for research concerning these women is vital; Kotik comments that this has to some extent been recognised, even by the establishment. The past decade has seen the opening in Central Europe of a substantial number of centres for gender studies, usually in collaboration with the major universities (Kotik 2007:157, 165). Feminist discourse has gained public legitimacy and currency. Thus it has also entered the language of art, offering an effective mode of expression for young female artists who want to tackle issues concerning class, gender and identity in their torn culture.

Multicultural feminism, it should be noted, constitutes a relatively new discourse, one of whose main proponents is the theoretician Ella Shohat, an Israeli woman currently teaching at the City University of New York's programme for culture and women's studies.¹⁴ One of her objectives is to export the principles of this discourse beyond the walls of the ivory tower of academia, for instance to the field of art and museal applications (Shohat 1998). Another key figure in the critical axis of visual and cultural studies is Irit Rogoff, currently Chair of Art History and Visual Culture at Goldsmiths' College, University of London. In her book *Terra Infirma*:

Geography's Visual Culture (2000), she considers various artistic media by a wide range of artists, and writes about phenomena like the Balkan wars. Building her argument with reference to themes such as borders, mapping and bodies, Rogoff explores how artists have confronted twentieth-century phenomena such as ethnic cleansing and forced migration, contested borders and nations in turmoil, issues of place and identity and their effect on the subject belonging, and exclusion. On a personal note, Rogoff's introductory chapter states:

My inquiry does not attempt to answer the question of a location of belonging; it is by no means my perspective since I have no idea where anyone belongs, least of all myself. It is, however, an attempt to take issue with the very question of belonging, with its naturalisation, as a set of political realities, epistemic structures and signifying systems. Thus it views questions of belonging through the cultural and epistemic signifying processes which are their manifestations in language. My choice of geography as a site which links together these relations between subjects and places and the grounding discourses that legitimate them is only partly metaphoric. I take it up in full knowledge that it has of late become an excessively overused metaphor which runs the danger of being evacuated of all meaning . . . (Rogoff 2000:15)

Cultural citizenship is an ongoing process, a nomadic and performative field (the latter notion was introduced by Judith Butler), marked by infinite self-invention for those who undergo uprooting and migration. It is through political visibility that the individual can make public statements and rebuild a legitimate 'self'. For immigrants in a new society this involves a two-fold process – empowering and disempowering at the same time – through which alone she or he can come to identify with the new society into which she or he is received (Joseph 1998:357). This process is often complex, elusive and problematic – but it is inevitable. In it, the migrant faces a variety of dilemmas involving the politics of representation, e.g. issues concerning dress and appearance, modes of behaviour and conduct in the public space, language, accent and modes of expression, and interpersonal communication with new friends and old communities (Momsen 2003).

It is thanks to processes that we capture under the general term globalisation that women can now get up and move about as they have never before. In the introduction to their *Global Woman*, Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Hochschild write:

In images known in the West, in ads and commercials for credit cards, cellular phones and airlines, executive women fly all over the globe, call home from luxurious hotels, and finally reunite with their loving children at airports. But we hear much less about an ever growing flow of feminine work and energy: increasing immigration of millions of women from poor countries into rich countries . . . This is the invisible side of globalization. (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2006:10)

The statistics indicate huge numbers of women who are currently on the move, mainly from poor countries to rich ones but also within one country – as in

Thailand (from north to south) or Germany (east to west). Most of the female migrants work as house cleaners. About fifty per cent of the 120 million legal and illegal migrants in the world are estimated to be women. Because exact data are lacking in many countries it is hard to trace these trends in any methodical, long-term fashion. Moreover, data-collection methods differ from one place to the next, making it difficult to conduct comparisons between nations (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2006:10). Still, these developments are sufficiently eloquent for some researchers, including Stephen Castles, Mark Miller and Janet Momsen, who are talking in terms of a feminisation of migration. However, the globalisation of female work has remained largely invisible and undiscussed in the First World.

Ehrenreich and Hochschild, whose study centred on female migrants who are employed in low-status jobs in Western countries, expressed their amazement that researchers have so far had so little to say about the fact that increasing numbers of children and elderly people in affluent Western countries either are cared for by female migrant care givers or live in homes that are being cleaned by female migrant cleaners. Even the activist groups that could have been expected to express their worry at this tendency – feminists and anti-globalists – seem to be mainly aware of the more blatant phenomena like trafficking and the female slave trade. Ehrenreich and Hochschild appeal for these most transparent women in the world, as they call them, to be made visible, and for them to be fully exposed: not just as migrant women and victims but as fighters who are struggling to improve their lives; not merely as workers but as subjects – wives and mothers who, on immigrating, leave behind a whole world.

At this point I would like to take a step back so as to reflect and find some coherent, useful meanings relating to the works we have discussed. Arguably, the point of constituting reality is rendering information and data significant by means of a structure and context that are humanly intelligible. Individual human experience is valid and sound only once it has been given common significance and set in a representational frame. Therefore, when we speak of ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ reality, the former consists of a shared institutional experience that outdoes the latter in terms of its social functions. The distance between these forms of reality is the result of language and representation, and the human brain filters that interprets objective reality, organising it according to its understanding. Art, when successful, has a way of undoing this distance. This results in a tension between objective and subjective forces, yielding a fertile conflict between the domains of empirical and non-empirical experience. A work of art re-examines the norms and values of the ‘objective world’, which is why art can function as such an excellent reality check, a kind of navigating device that gives us a sense of direction to implement ideas. The works examined in this article represent the type of contemporary art that treats the social and cultural issues discussed. As such, art does not present us with a collection of ready-made answers. Rather it confronts us with questions, which it often leaves unanswered. It does not look for a hidden truth, stacked away behind the surfaces of objective things, but looks to widen our horizons as we experience the known world.

Difficult, even provocative questions can surface through the experience of art, causing the spectators to reflect and to question old and entrenched perceptions. But the type of critique offered by art, it should be remembered, never offers itself as simply binary, flat, in the form of simple formulae: centre/periphery; oppressor/oppressed; evil man/good woman; soiled/pure; beautiful/ugly; active/passive, etc.

Contemporary feminist discourse is complex, flexible, extensive, multilayered and includes numerous axes that variously intersect (race, gender, class, sexuality, etc). Art, at its best, has the power to expose and draw us into a discourse on human conditions, thus leading to real change. The insight that, in an age of rising globalisation, we can no longer ignore silenced and excluded groups – such as labour migrants and women from developing countries, or indeed, women who lived in the former communist world – is now reflected in a large research output, as well as literary and visual work.

The work of Ostojic, Vincourova, Rossa and Tomic, which has been at the focus of this article, is the outcome of an attempt on the part of these Eastern European female artists to reappropriate what, even though oppressed, has always been theirs. This is the ability to control their own bodies and to find a voice by means of which they may talk about themselves and about their problems in terms specific to their position regarding gender, nationality and a changing political and economical reality. Many works of art by women like them the world over still remain outside this polyphonic project,¹⁵ because these women are not Euro-Americans (Shohat 2001:127).

An important observation that arises from the current study is that, with the exception of Milica Tomic, who represented her country at the Venice Biennale in 2003, the work of the other artists discussed here (and many like them) has had hardly any exposure beyond the 'ghetto' of so-called 'women's exhibitions' that were dedicated to these topics.

The canonical art world has so far been unable to provide the exposure that is proportionate to the abundant artistic production in this field. For instance, for the purpose of this article I could only refer to the catalogues of 'women's exhibitions'; to information provided by galleries representing the artists who wanted to boost their sales; and to the internet sites of political groups who perceived the work of these artists as being in line with their own interests. Sometimes the artists themselves opened a website of their own. The absence of these female artists from major exhibitions and from the collections of prestigious museums in the West (e.g. the MOMA in Manhattan, the Centre Pompidou in Paris, etc) is conspicuous.¹⁶ Books, in-depth articles or catalogues are not dedicated to them.

Even though multicultural discourse in general and feminism more specifically have made some headway, along with burning issues like migration within Europe and outside it, the hetero-European canon remains rigid and exclusive. The artistic hegemony will not easily forego its privileges or drop its favourites.

Nevertheless, changes are occurring. The participation of oppressed women in political protest movements or in private protest actions of an anti-patriarchal, anti-sexist nature – women whose work, until recently, was not perceived as having any relevance to the cultural discourse – are now gaining public visibility, and we can observe the beginnings of academic recognition. Over the past two decades,

researchers have been re-examining a range of disciplines with the aim of exposing and formulating a space for the narratives of women in our culture. And thus, for instance, the corpus of art work that has been evolving in the post-communist world in recent years reflects major contemporary changes in feminist theory and art. The main characteristic of this change is the move from identifying similarities between women to articulating their differences, and the issues arising from the transnational phenomena of the 1990s. The earlier emphasis on sameness has made a place for an understanding that feminism is a global, international issue, and now is the time to look at the variety of the situation of women, a variety that examines the similar parameters between and within cultures, classes, religions, types of sexual identity, etc. The 'similar difference' between women, context-bound, complex and fluid, suggests exciting approaches to the making of women's art in a transnational age (Mohanty 1998:485–89). Art can serve as a particularly effective seismograph if we want to find out what preoccupies women as a function of their gendered positioning: issues concerning war and violence, pollution and poverty, politics and money, identity, sexual identity and sexuality, life cycles and the family. All of these are currently under examination by female artists in their particular geopolitical contexts.

Notes

¹ See, for example, Deacon and Stubbs (2007) and Hess (2005).

² I would like to stress that all but one (Ann-Sofi Siden) of the artists chosen for discussion in this article are, as mentioned, from post-communist countries. My initial reason for analysing this specific group was reading the catalogue of (yet another) women's art exhibition entitled *Global Feminisms – New Directions in Contemporary Art*, held at The Brooklyn Museum in March 2007, in which they participated.

³ 'Migration Policy in a Changing Global Reality', available at: <http://www.idi.org.il/hebrew/printasp?id=814>

⁴ See, for example, Fetzner (2000).

⁵ I would like to stress that this article does not refer to the work of Western artists who are responding to the phenomenon of migration, but rather focuses on the work of those female artists who are themselves experiencing the consequences of transnationality and globalisation.

⁶ It should be noted that in some contexts, the suggestion that the visual arts are (merely) a reflection of social forces and circumstances is found to be inadequate.

⁷ For more about 'mail-ordered brides' see Villapando (1989). For a more general discussion see a text that introduces a gender dimension into theories of contemporary immigration issues, Kofman *et al.* (2000).

⁸ <http://www.kultur.at/howl/tanja/not/mission.htm> (page 1 of 2).

⁹ This statement should be restricted, and it should be stressed that in fact, there are countries that exercise some form of control on what gets published on the internet. Censorship in China, for example, has become especially intense.

¹⁰ Although the English title of the work is translated as 'The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly', the original Bulgarian version indicates that the artist was thinking of something like: 'The Good Woman, the Bad Woman, and the Ugly Man'.

¹¹ Boryana Rossa, interview at the Brooklyn Museum, New York, 23rd March 2007. Available at: http://flickr.com/photos/Brooklyn_museum/488424118

¹² Ann-Sofi Siden was born in Sweden, went to university in Germany and currently lives and works in Berlin. She is interested in issues concerning gender relations and class and how these are affected by globalisation, especially in the context of European reunification. I should mention that I failed to find work by female artists in post-communist countries that deals directly with prostitution in my research for this article (perhaps these artists are concerned about addressing this theme because dominant stereotypes put any Eastern European woman under suspicion of her being a prostitute?). For an article that analyses the history and ongoing use of such stereotypes concerning Eastern European women, see Berman (2003).

¹³ It should be mentioned that Sandoval, an assistant professor of critical and cultural theory in the Chicana/o Studies Department at the University of California, engages mainly with 'Third World Feminism' and feminism of colour, analysing contemporary perspectives in the USA that are quite unlike the Euro/Anglo condition. Nevertheless, I chose to use her work in the context of my discussion because her views of citizen-subject identity struggle hold potential power for other oppressed groups, even outside the USA.

¹⁴ Ella Shohat was among the first, starting from the early 1990s, to ask questions like: is it legitimate for states to impose armed struggle on a certain region, if the principle commitment and objective of the nation-state actually is, over and beyond providing them with citizenship, to look after its citizens' well-being? Given the international surge of trade (in commodities as well as in human beings), can we channel this in such a way as to profit citizens? Won't this flood drag along, and drown, too many people on its way, as it gathers ever more strength? She asks how we should redefine the notion of 'national needs' in an era of growing globalisation in which the nation-state has come to constitute only one component of the transnational continuum. In this situation, considerations on the level of the private citizen are often ignored and his/her rights trodden down. Shohat has dedicated several of her writings to the question of how we can rethink the postcolonial state (or the post-communist one, for that matter) as a site of identification and mobility; as 'home' for critical thinking, when these citizens are caught up in a history of repression and they are classical candidates for migration.

¹⁵ By 'polyphonic project' I mean a multitude of creative voices, which do not eliminate one another but coexist and perform on different platforms at the same time. In doing so, I refer to Mikhael Bakhtin, who wrote about 'Polyphonic spaces', especially in his book *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Bakhtin 1984).

¹⁶ Since the 1970s, feminist art historians have worked to re-enter female artists into the canon; artists, on an individual basis and in groups, have protested against the pervasive gender bias in the institutions of the art world. One well-known dissenting group is the 'Guerrilla Girls'.

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