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#51 'MATTER AS A HOPE OF FINDING SOME ANSWERS' - INTERVIEW SERIES - AUGUST 2019

PART 14: 'MATTER AS A HOPE OF FINDING SOME ANSWERS' NORTH MACEDONIA

'Through this act of re-examining the past, I refer to the theories of Marxism and of leftist ideology, discussing those issues openly.'
Artist Nada Prlja responds.



Nada Prlja, 'Red Discussion II.', 2019, live art event. Photo: Ana Lazarevska. Courtesy the artist

Question 1. (Manca Bajec and Isobel Wohl) Ralph Rugoff writes that this year's exhibition, entitled *May You Live in Interesting Times*, 'will no doubt include artworks that reflect upon precarious aspects of existence today, including different threats to key traditions, institutions and relationships of the "post-war order."' How do you feel that the work that you are presenting as part of your curated project responds to this set of concerns? (Or, for curators, how do the curatorial choices you have made respond to this set of concerns?)

The artist chose not to answer Question 1.

Question 2. (MB and IW) What does it mean for you as an artist, a curator, or a curatorial team to represent your country? How does the structure of the Venice Biennial, with its individual national pavilions, influence your choices as a participant? What does it mean, in terms of the current state of European and world politics, for us to emphasise national representation in the arts sector?

In 2006, I curated a show in London entitled *The Last Geographically Defined Exhibition*, in which I listed the names of the countries to which the participating artists belonged, before listing the names of the artists themselves. In doing so, I questioned how the participating artists (there were six from five different countries) perceived themselves and their work within the framework of being seen, first and foremost, as a representative of their native or adopted countries. The intention was to question the validity and relevance of national representation within the art world today, in the context of our contemporary global society. This clearly illustrates my point of view about the relation between art/artists and the notion of national representation.

Despite this point of view, my motivation to represent North Macedonia at the Venice Biennale was twofold. North Macedonia is a country which is ethnically and culturally diverse, both multi-layered and with a turbulent history. My team and I represent this complexity and diversity, and I am very pleased that the current government, through the Ministry of Culture and otherwise, has supported this. By selecting me, with my diverse

background and critical art practice, to represent North Macedonia, the cultural establishment signifies that it is now willing to support critical and explorative practices which do not engage with national promotion on a simplistic level, but rather reflect on the socio-political conditions in the country as well as within the wider world. From this perspective, I see the interaction between the 'artist' and the 'country' represented as a significant step forward for North Macedonia. The fact that our pavilion was not within the Giardini, where each country virtually owns its own national pavilion, but instead is housed within a typical Venetian Palazzo embedded within the urban fabric of the city, has also enabled my project and solo exhibition *Subversion to Redto* to be more site-specific and personal, thereby liberating it from the confines of a 'national' representation.

My general opinion is that pavilions should not necessarily be based on national representation: I am a supporter of pavilions that have chosen to include or be represented by artists of other nationalities. I am also a supporter of artists who discuss issues that are of crucial significance politically. At the same time, it is evident that at every Venice Biennale, there is a certain competitive tension regarding which country will win the award, which becomes more relevant than which artist, project, or exhibition is selected as being the most relevant or of the highest artistic quality. It was interesting to find out, while working on my exhibition, that not much has changed, during all these years in the existence of the Biennale, in terms of how the Biennale addresses representatives of each country, adhering still to a strictly hierarchical relation, based on diplomacy between countries.

For example, it remains important which political representatives from each particular government appear at the opening of their national pavilion, in this way validating the selection of the artist and their exhibition as a genuine national representation. In general, the political agendas of the Biennale and the participating countries are quite transparent, as they are readily visible through the interest and media support received by particular nations, which happen to be of interest in the current political climate (for example, this was evident with Ghana, which participated for the first time this year). Nevertheless, as this is one of the rare opportunities where culture has the capacity to directly

influence political agendas and the issue of national representation, I believe it is an important opportunity and that the cultural workers involved should take a stand and act responsibly through their contributions, in order to enable culture to be at the forefront, represent the avant-garde, and thereby to remain relevant to the world order.

Question 3. (MB and IW) How do the choices you've made in your national pavilion relate to recent developments in your artistic or curatorial practice? What do you hope that your creative decisions in this project will contribute to your work going forward?

My artistic practice has frequently been driven by the desire to not only comment on but also propose solutions to particular situations. It is often the case that artists make visual references to certain processes, making things which are otherwise less visible more accessible to the audience, but sometimes, certain art projects attempt to propose solutions as well. These proposals are not necessarily related to concrete solutions that can be offered through design, policy-making, or humanitarian aid, but instead tie these projects to multiple other disciplines, thereby offering alternative solutions through artistic methods of subversion. *Subversion to Red*, according to several art critics and journalists, as well as according to numerous members of the general public, represents this kind of enquiry, which contains a proposal.

Subversion to Red was conceived in the aftermath of one of my most ambitious art projects, entitled *Peace Wall*, which was commissioned by the Berlin Biennale in 2012. The project manifested the socioeconomic diversity and inequality of the citizens of Berlin through the realisation of a temporary barrier, a wall dividing the two sides of Western and Eastern Friedrichstrasse, one of the most prominent and historically significant streets in the city. This wall, which was 15m long and 5m high, illustrated a division of the citizens of the local community in those two areas of the street, with some of the lowest income families inhabiting the western side, while the endless row of high-end luxury stores on the Eastern side witnessed the presence of elitist life in near proximity.

This project, like many other artists' projects, visualised this division, but did not offer a solution to the problem. Even though the project offered to

the citizens a platform (quite literally) through which to voice and discuss their concerns and the relevant issues affecting their neighbourhood and livelihood, this option was not fully used by the citizens. The project's inability to offer concrete solutions for this relevant issue of economic inequality continued to haunt me after the end of the Berlin Biennale, and the possibility of encouraging or providing potential solutions to particular situations or issues has since become a focus of my artistic practice.

One of the first questions I now ask myself whenever I start creating a project is: Are there any solutions that I can offer with this project? The project *Subversion to Red* goes back to history, our common history, focusing in particular on the history of former Yugoslavia (of which Macedonia was once a part, as one of the country's six republics) and the era of socialism, questioning what was good and bad about that particular form of socialism. By asking ourselves whether or not it may be possible to 'reuse' aspects of this socialist ideology, by eliminating its negative sides, we consider whether it may be possible to 'bring back to the scene' certain elements of that system and ideology that could objectively be seen as being valuable.

Through this act of re-examining the past, I refer to the theories of Marxism and of leftist ideology, discussing those issues openly. It took a certain courage to propose this subject, now deeply unpopular to the current cultural establishment of North Macedonia, as a relevant project for the Venice Biennale, yet in my mind, bringing this topic to the international scene with the intention of enquiring into aspects of our recent past, creating a new opportunity to analyse thoroughly the knowledge and experiences of the past in the search of lost opportunities, is a relevant idea and a vital approach for an art project of this stature.

Subversion to Red seeks to stimulate provocatively the search for alternative forms of art and socio-political formations by revisiting specific concepts and societal models from the past. In response to Rugoff's concerns about current conditions, my project *Subversion to Red* encourages a return to the 'forgotten' notions of idealism and ideology, as an alternative form of motivation in contemporary society. It proposes a re-reading and de-/re-construction of the postulates of Marxist theory and Leftist thought, in order to seek their compatibility with today's society,

introducing subversive qualities and the playfulness of artistic practice, as a way of indirectly influencing reality. This approach is something I value and aim to continue working with in the future.

In 2013, the first live art event Red Discussion I was staged at the Calvert 22 Foundation in London. The theorists and cultural workers Dave Beech, Hannah Black, Gail Day, Mark Fisher and Nina Power gathered around the pentagonal red table, onto which the key findings of each participant and issues brought up during the ensuing discussion were written onto the surface of the table by moderator Vlad Morariu as the event unfolded. The red table with its white writings thereby became a kind of document, an artwork, or subversive guide, with possible guidelines for what from the leftist ideology and socialist experience from the past could be reintroduced and reused in society today and how this might happen.

In 2019, during the Venice Biennale, Red Discussion II was the opening event of the North Macedonian pavilion, with the participation of theorists and cultural workers Charles Esche, Maurizio Lazzarato, Chantal Mouffe, Laura Raicovich, and Artan Sadiku, moderated again by Vlad Morariu. Further discussions and confrontations are planned in the future, in different contexts and with different participants, after which the project should be able to offer concrete alternative solutions in relation to a variety of issues, such as labour, democratisation of society, the role of art institutions etc. It is significant that those 'offerings' have been created under the conditions of a live art event, where theorists and cultural workers are engaged in direct discussion and confrontation, in the search for resolutions. The format of this particular artwork was conceived and designed in this way in order to generate the responses of the participants in an environment of intellectual openness, while enabling and inviting emotional reactions to the opinions voiced and the theories proposed, with the intention of sharing their ideas and confronting other schools of thought from individuals with different experiences and levels of knowledge. For me, this is the essence of democracy and is aligned with what Boris Buden would call 'Socialism with a human face', which for him represents an acceptable form of societal arrangement.

As an engaged artist, I am fully immersed in these topics and issues, and it is something I hope to continue working on, with the aim of contributing to

the general discussion in the wider society, and to possible actions in relation to improvements regarding these issues in general. I see my work, in this sense, as a platform for gathering knowledge, ideas, and experience, that can hopefully be collected, redirected and reused concretely for the wider benefit of society.

It is also quite important to mention that with this project, in the process of making sculptures for the series of works under the title *The Collection*, She does what She wants, I also discovered a great affinity with certain aspects of sculpture-making. As my practice is always driven by specific concepts, it does not often rely on the use of classical art techniques. In this case, it was necessary for my work to take this format. This series of artworks in the exhibition refer to and are inspired by the works of artists (mainly from Macedonia) working in the 1960s in former Yugoslavia. These artists were important because they continued their individual artistic investigations, even though they did not align with mainstream political agendas. They were individualistic, not fashionable; experimental and transgressive, yet at the same time also appreciated by the mainstream and the general public, another lesson to be learned from the past.

For me, the act of painting or making of sculptures will probably always remain part of wider, multidisciplinary, layered exhibitions. I took here, within the framework of the Venice Biennale, an opportunity to indulge myself in being an artist per se, possibly a practice that I will find a way to continue.

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