Conversation with Verica Kovacevska

Petra Krolo / Marijana Romanic

Verica Kovacevska is a young Macedonian artist born in Skopje. She graduated in 2004 in Visual Art with Theatre and Performance from the University of Plymouth (UK), and in 2007 received her MPhil in Arts, Culture and Education from the University of Cambridge (UK). She articulates her ideas mainly through *site/context-specific* performances. She has decided on a participatory practice, which aims to engage the audience in the work as much as possible, and which intertwines personal concerns with current social, cultural, and political situations. Currently she lives and works in Zurich.

In her own words, she is interested in "exploring and transforming space; reducing the element of division between performer and viewer; uniting the psychological with the perceptual / the conceptual with the practical / thought with action; transforming the personal into universal, the public into private, and vice versa; the space between the known and the unknown; both audience and performer experiencing the work simultaneously; the physical characteristics of space, as well as its social, cultural and historical associations"…

Kovacevska stayed in Zagreb in June this year exploring Upper Town and its spatial, cultural, and historical context. Her work *Power Tower*, which she will present at this year's Urban Festival, is a result of her focus on a specific part of Upper Town in the frames of her years-long project – that explores and transforms public spaces through walking – appropriately titled as *The Walking Project*.

The audience that takes part in the project can navigate the artist in the urban space and track her position with a navigational system. The balance between the desire and fear of both freedom and control is a 'slippery slope' for both artist and audience, even though that 'slipperiness' is manifested on different levels.

The audience gets the opportunity to control and monitor; autonomously and sovereignty - acting from the shadow – they get the power to be merciless, careful, carrying, strategic, uncoordinated, intentional and unintentional… The artist puts herself blindly and obediently in their hands, accepting the situation of being dependant from their co-operation.

By creating possibilities to overtake control, the artist confronts the audience with decisions that, in fact, do not imply any kind of consequences, but, precisely because of that, leaning towards certain type of activity is a symptom of the level on which "opportunity makes a thief".

You have been working on your piece *The Walking Project* for a while now. Part of that project is about to be performed in Zagreb, and you have already performed it in various cities like Bradford, Belgrade, Tirana... In the piece the audience has control over you, they monitor and direct you via satellite cameras? What was the starting point of the project? What is intriguing in re-performing the piece in new contexts?

The starting point of the project was about wanting to interact with an audience remotely. I liked the idea of being both absent and present in the gallery. My performances have always been "invisible" in some way. I never perform in front of an audience directly – there is either a wall between us (like for instance in *Learning to Love Me* where I divided the gallery into two parts - one for me and the other one for the audience), or I am in a completely different location from them, or in some instances they are not even aware that I am performing. So, these aspects of "invisibility" and "remote interaction" were what started the project. Soon after, I began to think about freedom and control, and turned myself into an urban pawn that the audience could move and monitor in the city.

However, doing the project in a different city is not 're-performing'. With every performance I explore a different topic

about cities, technology and/or control, as well as employ very different strategies for interaction. So, in essence the basic elements are there, but everything else changes. Thus, for me the most interesting part is how to make these changes successful each time, and how to really link each performance to the city in which the walk takes place.

BETWEEN CONTROL AND CARE / In the thematic frame of this year's Urban Festival we emphasised not only CCTV surveillance in public space, but also more subtle mechanisms of control. How do you consider different levels of surveillance in your work?

I think that visibility and control are two aspects that are interlinked.

Today with the help of various technologies such as CCTV cameras, GPS, biometrics, and the Internet, our data, movements, actions, behavior, and thinking patters can easily be monitored. This offers the basic condition of collecting knowledge, of being 'in control'.

However, as these technologies become increasingly more sophisticated and less visible themselves, the level of control becomes more subtle (but not less powerful). We no longer need to (or in fact do) know the specifics of how, by whom and for what purpose we are being watched, but the fact that we are aware of being watched makes us wary of our behavior and actions. In other words, we begin to self-regulate.

Whether this self-regulation is something we do consciously or not, and whether it is intended consciously or not, is not important, what matters is how complex this power relationship of *seeing* and *being seen* is and how it is linked to the simple act of watching.

In your performance, *Power Tower*, you are referring to both medieval and current mechanisms of control and surveillance. What was your impression of the Tower of Lostrcak and in which

way do you connect its historical role with today's situation, i.e. the government buildings and CCTV cameras? It seems that it's about a dialog between two paradigms of surveillance, foucalutian and deleuzian.

Well, it's certainly interesting to observe that the medieval and present day Upper Town have more in common than one may think.

For me, it was important to use this tower because of its historic and symbolic significance. If we go back to the history of surveillance, we will find that it was developed during medieval times, i.e. when these towers were built. This is also the beginning of modern cities. So it is important to note the parallels between the development of cities and the development of surveillance mechanisms. Clearly this had to with marking and protecting territories, i.e. the territory of the new city, as well as with keeping social order within the cities. Today, however, the protection part is somewhat blurry. Who do the new surveillance mechanisms protect? And furthermore, how do they maintain social order? Focault and Deleuze both provide interesting theories on this.

In Focault's theory, a central tower – the Panopticon – is of crucial importance. He describes this tower as a symbolic object of power, i.e. a place from which one can see without ever being seen. This may also be the reason why many scholars have drawn a parallel between the central tower and the CCTV cameras. In addition, he describes this type of watching as a disciplinary measure. This is different from Deleuze who talks about control, rather than disciplinary measures, based increasingly on seduction and enticement through the manipulation of opportunity and desire rather than just coercion or constraint.

Certainly, the possibility of watching from a higher position or perspective can be very powerful, and potentially dangerous. As Lyon explains, surveillance has two faces, "the same process, surveillance – 'to watch over' – both enables and constrains, involves care and control." And this tension

is something that I want to explore in *Power Tower*.

You are often performing in public space. How does the context of public space (unlike galleries) condition the final shape of your piece? How do you deal with the different characteristics that the public space offers?

I think that sometimes I find dealing with public space easier than with gallery space. In fact, after graduating from University, I found the gallery space condition the final shape of my work more so than the public space. There was something about this white clinical cube that was so uninviting. It felt unnatural to show or create my work (or most of my work) there. I guess part of that came from the fact that I mainly did performance work, so my practice was not studio-based. Actually, it was through the audience, or my interaction and focus on the audience that I eased my way into the white cute.

Nowadays, I work as much inside as outside the white cube. Thus, I am always aware of the transformation that needs to be made in order to show the work in both spaces. I like how *The Walking Project* uses both spaces simultaneously, and in doing so connects them.

EAST AND WEST / Having in mind the fact that you have spent part of your life and education in countries being referred to as "Europe" or "The West", but also in so called "Balkan" or "Eastern European" countries what are your experiences with these two different socio-cultural contexts? To what point is this contrast constructed? To what extent do you adjust your approach to a specific topic or project to the context you are operating with at the moment?

I am very thankful to have had the opportunity to work and live in both of these areas, and to learn something from both. I tend not to adjust my works for "Western" or "Eastern" audiences, even though sometimes I do find that their reactions are different.

The discussion of "Eastern" and "Western" art is still very much present, although probably less so than five or ten years ago. There is definitely some truth to that contrast, but a lot of it has also been constructed. It's actually very difficult to compare both on an equal level, because very different opportunities exist in both. Also, one has to remember that the "West" has an art market, which the "East" does not fully have. I really liked this sentence that one of the Croatian artists from "The Group of Six Authors" (Mladen Stilinovic) said in a work; I can't quote it, but it went something like: "in the West contemporary artists started to get paid for their work, so they have less time to think about what they are doing". It is a bit simplified, but there is some truth to it as well.

To what level is the investment in contemporary art developed in Switzerland, and through which channels? What are the chances for infiltrating in the scene and is it hard to start exhibiting there?

I think that Switzerland has very interesting funding opportunities for the arts in general. The funding comes from both state and private investments, and usually it works on local or cantonal level. As you know Switzerland is a federal state, so each canton has different opportunities and rules for funding. That makes for a very interesting scene, because even in the smallest or less well-known places you find incredible institutions or festivals.

In terms of infiltrating in the scene itself, as in every other country it takes some time to find your way around it.

CONTEXTS AND SPACES / What is the Macedonian art scene like? Although you do not live in Macedonia for a while now, you still declare yourself as a Macedonian artist. Do you carry your Macedonian socio-cultural context wherever you are, or has the education in England been more influential?

I like that things have started to move again in Macedonia and I appreciate that

people are working under often-difficult socio-economic and political conditions. There is great enthusiasm coming from the younger generation of artists, and in the past few years there have been many interesting exhibitions by younger artists. What is definitely missing in Macedonia is some constructive criticism and theoretical discussions on issues within contemporary art. I think the small institutions or organisations put some effort into that, which is great, but some initiative has to come from the big institutions as well.

In terms of identity, I will always consider myself a Macedonian no matter where I live. Certainly, the different cultures in which I have studied and worked have had an influence on me, but ultimately I will always be a Macedonian.

While you were on a research stay in Zagreb there was a protest for preserving the pedestrian zone in Varsavska Street. Are there any similar initiatives by non-government organisations in Skopje or Zurich?

I haven't seen any such initiatives in Zurich. But any change in Zurich would be appropriately communicated to the citizens of that area and probably they would have a voting in order to allow such change to take place. It may seem a little orderly, but it's definitely the way to do things.

In Skopje, on the other hand, there is a real chaos in terms of where most things are built. You would now find the most inappropriate buildings in the most inappropriate places. It has gotten so out of hand that many people have given up on protesting.

What do you think of the Zagreb art scene and our newly built Contemporary Art Museum? Can you comment on some exhibitions you have seen here?

I definitely appreciated the different spaces and contexts in which exhibitions take place in Zagreb, as well as the critical discussion on art.

The new museum is an impressive building with an impressive collection. Personally, however, I would have preferred to see more Croatian art in the permanent collection. My favorite piece was this documentary film on The Group of Six Authors created by Kristine Leko and Gordana Brzovic. It was very well made, and told the story not only of the group, but also the socio-political situation and art scene in Croatia and how they are interlinked. It's a bit hidden in the museum, but once you find it, it's well worth seeing it.