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Interview With Macedonian Curator Suzana Milevska

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Read an insightful interview about the contemporary art scene in Macedonia and the Balkans, the curatorial profession and how the life of an art historian in Vienna is different from London.

(<http://thenewcontemporary.files.wordpress.com/2014/03/suzana-milevska-photo-by-dejan-petrovic487.jpg>)

Suzana Milevska, photo by Dejan Petrović

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Kristina Kulakova: Where did you study art? Is there a place in Macedonia you can get a good art education?

Suzana Milevska: I started my study of art history at the Institute of Art History and Archeology at the State University Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Skopje (http://www.ukim.edu.mk/en_index.php), Macedonia and continued my education at the Central European University in Prague (<http://www.ceu.hu/>)(MA in History and Philosophy of Art and Architecture 1994) and at Goldsmiths College-University of London (<http://www.gold.ac.uk/>)(PhD in Visual Cultures 2006). In addition, I consider my independent research trips as a very relevant part of my education. Ever since I was a young student, in parallel to attending the university program, I started travelling abroad intensively in order to visit the famous museums and art collections and to see the original art works. At that time there were no research grants, or at least I was not aware of them, so I funded my trips while working part-time abroad. So my education was very diverse, cross-disciplinary and international. In fact, I believe that this is the only way one could understand the complexity and fast development of contemporary art. One of the biggest problems of the art education in Macedonia is the lack of focused and interdisciplinary theoretical courses, both at the Institute of Art History and at the Academy of Fine Arts, as well as in the conservative programs that do not reflect the changes in art and theoretical discourses, for example, teaching linear Western art history without addressing art and art histories in the region.

KK: What do most of the young artists do, after finishing their studies, in Macedonia? Do they choose living in Macedonia or moving abroad as a better solution?

SM: They mostly stay in Macedonia but, unfortunately, this is not their choice and they don't have many opportunities to leave either. To be more precise, if they stay in Macedonia this is not their own choice motivated by the availability of different career options. On the contrary, the continuation of art education abroad and pursuing international careers are not so accessible to the contemporary

artists in Macedonia for financial and socio-political reasons. Their basic local art education is very limited. I used to teach at the Academy of Fine Arts so I could experience from inside-out how obsolete most of the courses, teaching methods and general structure of this institution were. Furthermore, the funds and the art institutions in Macedonia are monopolized by the State, so the artists even when trying very hard have difficulties adjusting to the standards and expectations of the international art scenes. Any art market is only a wishful thinking concept. However, one particular group of artists would be an exception: the artists who collaborate on the state-run project "[Skopje 2014 \(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Skopje_2014\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Skopje_2014)". Aside from that, there are many architectural buildings including a lot of ideologically and nationalistically inspired public sculptures and monuments. These artists' fees, although they are without any national or international careers preceding the commissions, far exceed the usual international fees so it's "understandable" why they wouldn't even try to pursue international careers. It's so much more demanding than the comfortable position at home.

KK: What do you think about the contemporary art scene in Macedonia? What about the contemporary art scene of the Balkans?

SM: It's impossible to summarize the contemporary art scenes in the Balkans under one rubric. For example, the historic and political context in ex-Yugoslav countries is very different from the countries that before 1989 belonged to the Eastern Bloc (Bulgaria, Romania). Nor is it possible to compare Greece's art scene with art from any of the ex-communist countries. The case of Albania is also peculiar. The art scene in Macedonia would be also difficult to compare because of its isolation: already within ex-Yugoslavia artists from Macedonia were marginalized and even now the contemporary art scene in Macedonia is almost invisible from the international art context exactly because when there are shows branded "Balkan" they hardly include artists from Macedonia, with only a few exceptions. Still one similarity shared by all these countries would be the existence of strong modernist art traditions in parallel with very strong avant-garde figures that still need to be revisited, researched and brought to the light of international critical and commercial art scenes.

KK: How does the interaction between East and West influence the local contemporary art scene?

SM: I want to believe that the East and West dichotomy doesn't function the same way as before. Many things changed within each of these categories and the borders between the two shifted so many times in both directions (particularly with so many Eastern countries accessioned to the EU: Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovenia, Baltic countries, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, Croatia...). The fact is that at the moment there are only few Balkan countries and former Soviet countries outside of the EU, including my home country, Macedonia. Therefore, the art scenes in both geo-political parts are affected in terms of communication, exchange, collaboration, both through official channels (e.g. institutional collaborations supported with EU funding) and in spontaneous and individual unofficial ways. Many of my colleagues talk about "Former East" and "Former West". However there is still a substantially unequal exchange in terms of the art market and general neoliberal economic relations which makes the mutual influence limited and often only declarative, which makes this discussion relevant only in hypothetical terms. For example, it is vastly important that there are so many art galleries at the VIENNAFAIR from the former East but also it would be relevant to make a comparison of the sold art works and achieved prices. I am not an expert in this field and I don't have access to any analysis of a similar kind so what I am trying to say is that without this kind of research any theoretical analysis may turn partial and even irrelevant.

KK: How strong is the distinction between the genders represented in the Macedonian art scene?

SM: I'd rather speak about representation in institutional critical terms than about representation within artworks because I am really appalled by the way in which some of the male and sometimes female artists still represent women's bodies in their art, but this really needs a much longer and precise analysis. I often spoke about the complete absence of women in public space or even the only few who are present are mostly represented as either frivolous sexualized half-naked women, or as

pregnant future mothers.

Unfortunately, I cannot reveal anything new in institutional policies, either; it's the usual patriarchal division. There are hardly any retrospectives of a single woman artist, the collection of Contemporary Art is still dominated by male artists, only 15 % of the professors at the Academy of Fine Arts are women (while female students dominate) and I could go on and on... I wouldn't agree with some colleagues who see the issue of "glass-ceiling" as obsolete and boring, although actually in this context it's still relevant.

My opinion is that it is all about the lack of clearly defined and generally pushed feminism and feminist methodology that I find urgent and necessary in any patriarchal and conservative society as is the Macedonian society, rather than about the gender proportion and representation of genders in art. The danger of introducing pro-life/anti-abortion laws under the pressure of religiously and nationalistically driven political leaders, the ridiculous population politics pushing new laws for support of forth child that, in the situation of extreme poverty, would eventually turn women into birth-machines. All need to be addressed and tackled also in the field of art and culture because artists and cultural workers are a very vulnerable and precarious category.

KK: What was the effect that the book you published in 2010 – "[Gender Difference in the Balkans \(http://www.amazon.com/Gender-Difference-Balkans-representations-contemporary/dp/3639200322\)](http://www.amazon.com/Gender-Difference-Balkans-representations-contemporary/dp/3639200322)" had in the Macedonian art context?

SM: The book was published in English and is distributed online so I have only limited feedback, mostly from colleagues working in the international academic circles in the field of visual culture and contemporary art. I doubt that anybody uses the book as a reference in the Macedonian academic circles. One possible explanation beside the publication's foreign language is that it's very usual in our region to refer to international resources and not to look at the available texts written by peers in the same country or in the neighborhood.

<http://thenewcontemporary.files.wordpress.com/2014/03/978-3-639-20032-4-full.jpg>

KK: How did you come to curating?

SM: That's really interesting question, but the answer is not very glamorous. I was somehow forced to invent a job/profession for myself because for more than thirteen years after graduating and completing my MA studies, I could not get proper employment in Macedonia. From 1984-1997 I applied hundreds of times and was rejected from almost every art and cultural institution in Macedonia. For a while I even had an idea to exhibit all my job applications – no answers or any justifications were given – or to have a performance: writing in public in front of the institutions where I was applying. I was so naïve and once I sued The Museum of Contemporary Art because of an unlawful language test and that's when my troubles started to be even bigger. Therefore, in parallel to the unsuccessful job hunting, I started independent curating as it was the only option available. I must clarify that at the beginning curating was not a very glamorous option, though, when taking into account that for a very long time it was not acknowledged as a specific job so I was not paid for curating exhibitions but only for writing the catalogue entry, if there would have been an exhibition catalogue at all. I remember that for various reasons in 1998 I was almost expelled from the Macedonian section of AICA ([The International Association of Art Critics \(http://www.aica-int.org/\)](http://www.aica-int.org/)) and the use of the term curator was mentioned as one of them, an additional reason was my presentation at [Manifesta 2 in Luxembourg \(http://www.manifesta.org/manifesta2/f/manifest.html\)](http://www.manifesta.org/manifesta2/f/manifest.html), actually my critique of the Museum of Contemporary Art's managerial and cultural policy that led to deterioration of the building and to keeping its collection in storage for almost twenty years. To conclude, for me the independent curating was a kind of survival and a kind of activism. My projects and other activities in the 1990s gave some alternative chances to artists who were otherwise not accepted by the very strong power

structures at that time. Later (1998-2004) I became a curator of the Museum of the City in Skopje (<http://www.mgs.org.mk/index.php/mk/>) and could curate on a larger institutional and international scale.

KK: Using the term “curator” to describe your profession was almost inappropriate back in the nineties, in Macedonia. What was it like to be a female curator in the local Macedonian context at the beginning of the nineties?

SM: One of the problems that I faced while introducing the term on the Macedonian art scene was a very banal linguistic phenomenon, but gender-wise very important: it was the homonymy (the first syllabus of the term “curator” (“kur”) in Macedonian sounds exactly the same as “penis”) that made the introducing of the use of the term very slow and difficult in the professional circles and in the media. For example, at the beginning I would always been asked by the journalists to “translate” it as a “custodian” or “organizer” because of the children eventually watching the TV program. The other problem was the reality of gender relations in the art institutions that back there was extreme; all directors of art institutions were male.

KK: How is it different now?

SM: Well, now the curatorial profession even in Macedonia became very prestigious and appealing. Most of my colleagues, who were against the use of the term in the 1990s, use it to describe their role and profession in the context of exhibition making. There are many more opportunities for young curators such as open calls for grants, residencies, educational programs, etc. and the artists became aware of the difference that a curator can make in the preparation and presentation of an art project. Even the local Association of the Artists DLUM (<http://www.dlum.org.mk/en/>) invites curators to curate their exhibitions, although they decide on the topics in advance before they invite the curators who speak about the lack of understanding of the profession’s role. However, this counts only in the independent art scene: the curatorial positions in public art institutions are undermined and we have a situation where most of the important curatorial decisions are made directly by the Prime Minister, the Ministry of Culture (by the Minister of Culture) or by the institutions’ directors who mostly haven’t been educated or had any previous experience in the art field and were appointed by the Government directly. It is a direct autocracy in the Macedonian way.

KK: What has to be changed in Macedonia in order to obtain a better definition of curating and to make it worthwhile economically?

SM: Many things come to mind, e.g. introducing competitions for curatorial projects, curatorial fees, awards for curating on a national level, considering that there is still not even an award for art critique, and, most importantly, including the curators in different juries for art competitions and awards. One of the biggest problems I’ve noticed during all these years was that artists dominate as members in most of the juries for selection of the supported institutional programs and projects. So it’s usually a decision of the artists which institution will receive state support for what kind of program. The artists often dominate in selecting public art projects and even for selection of the representatives of Macedonia at Venice Biennale. There should at least be a balance between artists and curators in making such important decisions.

KK: In November 2013 you had a public talk at the Academy of Arts Vienna about “How to become a curator?” Is it possible to reconcile the contradictions stemming from “being-art historian” and “becoming-curator”?

SM: In my presentation I addressed the relation between the usual educational background of contemporary art curators as art historians and the curatorial profession. My thesis was that the contradictions between the methodology of art history and curatorial theory and practice reconcile in each of the curatorial events and that becoming-curator is not a kind of gradual developmental process. I referred to Gille Deleuze (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gilles_Deleuze)’s concept “off-spring of events” in the context of interpreting curatorial subjectivity. Each curatorial project enables a certain redefinition of one’s own curating strategies and should offer some theoretical and

curatorial propositions. Of course, art historical knowledge helps as a very important back up but often its preconceived narrative can prevent the curator from the production of new knowledge about contemporary art. In my view, curatorial education is only one of such events but cannot alone define curators in terms of “becoming-curator”.

KK: What strikes you about Vienna and Austria?

SM: I am still new in town and because I gave priority to my course, the students and other activities at the Academy of Fine Arts (http://www.akbild.ac.at/?set_language=en&cl=en) where I am teaching, I cannot say that I've managed to grasp the complex differences between life here and in my home country. I can only say that from the first impression the difference is so huge that there cannot even be an appropriate comparison. However, I could briefly compare the Austrian and British cultural and academic context (I was living in London, between 2001 and 2005) from one particular angle. I am impressed by the quality of everyday life and most of all the social fabric of human relations that is still resisting the threat of deterioration under the waves of neoliberal pace of extension of the workday through virtual labor channeled via new media. In addition, I see the biggest difference in the attempts of the Austrian Academy to resist the fast changes that are enforced by neo-liberal intrusion in academic life and particularly to the calls for introducing much higher tuition fees. Unfortunately, I also faced the Refugee deportation protests, I encountered the demonstrators against the Academikerball and the unexpected outbursts of violence forced against them during the Rundgang (http://www.akbild.ac.at/Portal/akademie/aktuelles/vortraege-events/2014/akbild_event.2013-12-10.1359128500?set_language=de&cl=de) exhibitions at the Academy so I am fully aware of the contradictions and challenges with which both the Austrians and the immigrants have to live and negotiate their existence. The most amazing thing is that, besides all these contradictions, my overall experience is mostly positive and this is the result of the friendly, communicative and hospitable approach of almost everybody I've met in the art field which is so different from the elitist and celebrity oriented culture that dominated the art scene in Great Britain.

KK: What is your opinion on the contemporary art scene in Austria?

SM: After a few months, during which I could attend only some of the many art exhibitions, I could just notice that the art scene is very intense. In just a few months I came across so many different artistic positions and practices that I feel that it would be arrogant to give a generalized opinion. I must admit that I knew only few Austrian artists from before, the ones that are internationally acknowledged and more present, but during this period I came across so many interesting artists that I'd need to spend a much longer time in order to reflect with a proper and more profound analysis of the art scene. I saw a few interesting independent curatorial projects but I must admit that the museums' shows were not as exciting and impressive as I expected, although professionally they were all well done. Most of all, I appreciate the reciprocal relation of art and theory established through institutional support (e. g. in the Institute for Art Theory and Cultural Studies, Visual Culture Course at TUW, ECM course at the Academy of Applied Arts and at other departments at the Vienna University) and also through many discursive events that are regularly organized in different public institutions in the context of exhibitions' presentations. I really appreciate that my colleagues at the Academy of Fine Arts and elsewhere dedicate some quality time to critical discussions about art and to producing relevant interpretations outside of the expected academic and public context. I am so happy to have the opportunity to spend a longer time in this very perplexing and theory-friendly environment.

KK: What is your favorite place in Eastern Europe?

SM: Ljubljana, for its artists, museums, SKUC (<http://www.galerija.skuc-drustvo.si/>) and other public galleries, artist run spaces (P74 (<http://www.zavod-parasite.si/eng/>), Aksioma (<http://www.aksioma.org/>)...), independent curators, discursive events, the curatorial school World

of Art (<http://www.worldofart.org/current/>), etc. There is a great concentration of active art institutions and independent spaces in such a small town with so few resources that I am always happy to revisit Ljubljana.

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Dr. Suzana Milevska is a theorist and curator of visual art and culture. Her interests include postcolonial critique of hegemonic power regimes of representation, feminist art and gender theory, participatory and collaborative art practices. She holds a PhD in visual culture from Goldsmiths College London and was a Fulbright Senior Research Scholar (2004). She taught visual culture and gender at the Gender Studies Institute at the University Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Skopje (2013) and history and theory of art at the Faculty of Fine Arts – University Ss. Cyril and Methodius of Skopje (2010-2012). Her cross-disciplinary project The Renaming Machine (2008-2010) consisted of a series of exhibitions and discursive events and the Renaming Machine Book. She published the book *Gender Difference in the Balkans* (Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag, 2010). In 2012 Milevska received the Igor Zabel Award for Culture and Theory and in 2013 she was appointed the first Endowed Professor for Central and South East European Art Histories at the Academy of Fine Art in Vienna.

Tags: [Academikerball](#), [Academy of Fine Arts Vienna](#), [Aksioma](#), [art education](#), [art education in Macedonia](#), [Art History](#), [Art in Macedonia](#), [contemporary art](#), [curator](#), [ERSTE Stiftung](#), [Gender Difference in the Balkans](#), [Gille Deleuze](#), [Goldsmiths College-University of London](#), [local Association of the Artists](#), [Macedonia at Venice Biennale](#), [Macedonian art](#), [Manifesta](#), [Museum of the City in Skopje](#), [P74](#), [Rundgang](#), [Skopje 2014](#), [SKUC](#), [the curatorial school World of Art](#), [Western art history](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).

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