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Episode 9: Panel discussion—‘Art and culture in neoliberal and nationalist times’

Bloggng about the Flanders Balkan Express Meeting (Ljubljana)



picture: Joris Janssens

During the Flanders Balkan Express we had an interesting panel discussion about art in neoliberal and national times, following the keynote of Pascal

Gielen on this topic. 8 people shared their ideas and experiences with us.

Moderator: Rarita Zbranca, Alt Art, Romania

Marta Keil, theoretician and curator Konfrontacje festival (Lublin), Poland



Marta took this photo in front of the public repertory theatre in Warsaw in May. The picture was taken during the representation of ‘The curse’ by Oliver Frljic, a play which was based on a Polish classical text about the domination of the church. Frljic, a Croatian director, touches issues such as paedophilia, abortion, the abuse of power, xenophobia ... One actor has sex with the statue of pope John Paul II and at the end, a cross is sawed (see picture). Nationalists tried to block the entrance from the public. It was quite exceptional that theatre made people protest in the streets and even block the door for the audience ...

Marta mentions this to show the wave of neo-nationalism in the country. But this performance also influenced the discussion about the role of institutions. It was the first time that this was so vivid. Everyone in the arts field had to somehow position themselves towards the show. Going to the performance became equal to a political position. It became a crucial question whether a festival or theatre would invite the show or not. They were often faced with self-

ensorship or economic censorship. One director would not invite it because he had to apply for a 3-year funding and was afraid that he would not get it. Another reaction they faced was ‘if artists want to do such things, they should pay it from private money’.

In these times of neo-nationalism, you can never take for granted what you have. They are faced with question such as ‘What percentage of your programme will be political?’. When you start explaining it, you realize that you start incorporating this language and are confronted with the notion of self-censorship. This will be their last festival. They were told that they are working too much internationally, while there are so many national artists to be supported ...

Any attempt to look critically at the institutions becomes very complicated: it is seen as crucial to protect them because this nationalist wave is so high ... So you are not allowed to question the hierarchy in the leftist theatres ... ‘Don’t you have other things to worry about?’ But for Marta it is crucial to question what seems obvious, problematize what is taken for granted. Protecting art institutions means also being self-reflective, and critically analysing modes of working. We should work on the fictional institution (‘what if ...’): the fictional art institution that cannot institutionalize itself.

They asked themselves what solidarity looks like? Can we think about new ways of solidarity between artists, audiences and institutions, both on the local and international level? Disobey the flow? The festival tried to open as a space for the artists from Poland for 7 days. Some of them presented their work, others didn’t. They worked together, gathered and thought. It was about opening the frames, spending some time together instead of being productive again.

Michiel Vandeveld, artist, Belgium

Michiel works as a choreographer, curator, writer and editor. He is a member of the artistic team of Kunsthal Extra City in Antwerp, Bâtard festival in Brussels and of the editorial team of Etcetera (a performing arts magazine). From 2017 to 2021 Michiel Vandeveld will be artist in residence at Kaaitheater in Brussels.

In 2012, Michiel was involved in the Indignados movement in Brussels. He then joined the Occupy movement in London. There, a lot of problems and frustrations came together in a strong gesture of occupying places. It did not last long (maybe because emotions were

not transferred into a kind of organisation, see also the lecture of Pascal Gielen).

He then asked himself how you can realize a transformation, how you can take the power. He saw 3 options: start a business, start a political party or start a think-tank. He chose to create a political party. The aim of 'The political party' (still ongoing) is to think about organisation; it does not suggest any ideology. He started a series of think-tanks about what could be other ways of political organisation, in which everyone could join. Is a political party still desirable? Which other fictions (social, political etc.) can we imagine?



Michiel had the idea that a lot of knowledge was missing. That is why he built a driving library—in a van—where people could borrow a book for some time. After a while, he contacted them and he would have a discussion about the book with them. The think-tanks, library and discussions resulted in a newspaper with statements about chaos, super-diversity etc. The project still goes on. It is a bit silent now, but it will be revived in 2018 and 2019, when there will be Belgian and European elections.

Other projects include the conference 'FASTER/SLOWER/FUTURE. Towards post-capitalism'. Michiel critiques the left for their tendency to focus primarily on local initiatives. This is for him problematic because money flows are mostly global. How to bring in the global again in the leftist? A solution might be the digital sphere, where you can operate from within activism on a more global level.

A last project Michiel mentions in the Bank of the Commons, which he co-founded with other artists. It proposes to work in fair coin, a

new currency. That way, it transcends monetary boundaries. But then the question is: who can become a merchant? There you get a connection between the local and the global (a local organisation decides who can become a member).

Katarina Stegnar, Beton Ltd., Slovenia

Katarina worked as a freelancer for 15 years and is since 2 years employed by the national theatre. She describes the tension between the institutions and the independent scene as follows: people working in the public field talk about what will be their next holiday. In the independent scene, people talk about their next project. In the official system, regulations are strict (for ex. about how many rehearsals/shows you can do). When you work in the independent scene, you can do everything yourself. No one is protecting you with rules but this is also a choice. She describes it as follows: 'we are warriors of capitalism: we do what we want and are prepared to do anything'.

In the independent scene, there is freedom of creation. In the big institutions, other people decide what you do. However, funding for independent production was cut totally in Slovenia. The scene is small. During the last 20 years, independent production was a kind of 'garage', ideas developed there and were taken to the national theatre. Therefore, it is very ignorant of the ministry of culture to not subsidize this anymore, because they are losing their pool of ideas.

Katarina also reacts on the story of Marta: "I think every artist would like a reaction like on 'The Curse' (Oliver Frljic), because that means that art means something ... Here, you do a political performance and nothing happens ... That is even more dangerous ..." Marta agrees, but the level of aggression is escalating and frightening. They see organized nationalist groups who are aggressive towards the audience

Following a question, Katarina explains that for her, you have to make the decision to take responsibility in your life, leaving your 'punk' life behind. It feels natural to do it that way. This allows you to create space for young artists. As a challenge or social experiment, she proposes that we would all go into early retirement and live from 250 euros / month, thus giving space to the younger generation.

Filip Jovanovski and Ivana Vaseva, AKTO festival, Skopje, Macedonia

The 'Faculty of things that can't be learned—FRU' started in 2000 and is the opposite of formal art education. Their work is threefold: they have a public programme where they organise exhibitions, conferences etc., then there is the AKTO festival for contemporary art and finally DENES—Young visual artist award in Macedonia and the discursive-educational program titled 'The Perfect Artist'.

To start with, Ivana and Filip explain the socio-political context in Macedonia in which they work. In 2009, there was a protest against the building of a church—the project had to stop. Contra-protesters appeared and it became a big issue. From that, a new history of civil activism started. A few months later, the government announced their new project: around 400 new monuments would be built in the city centre, mainly in neoclassical baroque style (the project is known as 'Skopje 2014'). They started reshaping the city without any involvement of citizens: the idea was to erase the 'corrupt communist past' by neoclassical baroque facades.



the central square in Skopje

Ten years ago, the main square in Skopje looked empty; it was a free public space. Now, a lot of monuments have been erected on the square ... In the context of constructing a new identity, also new institutions were built, such as the 'Museum of the Victims of the Communist Regime'.

They explain how the Colourful Revolution (2016) appeared: protesters marked monuments with colour every day during 3

months, in an attempt to de-aestheticize the whole project of the minister.



But there is hope for the future: the government of Macedonia changed a week ago and the new minister of Culture is someone from the arts field.

In 2015, the 10th edition of the AKTO festival was organised in Bitola, a small city in Macedonia. There was however little reason for celebration, as their funding was cut off completely and the permit to make work in public space was refused. It would have been logical to cancel the festival, but they went on. They then designed a small mobile construction, like a gallery space. They put it in a private yard, and the whole festival was produced from this container. For the opening, they invited all colleagues and friends from the region (they had no support from media or local authorities). A lot of events were organised in the gallery and in the private theatres in Bitola. On the main square, they read the constitution.

During AKTO 2016, they felt a bit liberated and spread out to 3 cities in Macedonia. The central theme of the conference was the responsibility of the artist in times of socio-economic crisis.

Teja Reba, City of Women, Slovenia

Teja has a question for the organizers of this talk: did they invite someone from social centre / squat Rog? Rog is in a very precarious situation, as it is a squatted space threatened to be destroyed. It has become the social centre for refugees and migrants on the Balkan route, who are more or less trapped here. She is part of a working group for women refugees. Teja: “We are from the middle class and we are talking about rights etc., but we have no idea what it looks like when people are on the bottom of society—people who have lost their jobs, do not possess anything, have lost their rights etc. This is a very different reality and art does not really acknowledge this ...”

What can art do in these circumstances? It is interesting to understand how neoliberalism and nationalism use different concepts and strategies. Neoliberalism is forcing the subject into the position of a consumer, in a perverse concept of freedom: choice between products. Nationalism is the opposite: it wants to control, create borders. How can nationalism operate within neoliberal systems? Pascal Gielen stated the idea of culture (instead of economy) as the basis of society. But according to Teja, nationalism is already relying a lot on culture to glue different groups and to define. The only party who really wanted to keep the ministry of culture was the right wing ... The idea of controlling culture is very important for them. Culture is another means of disseminating ideology.

City of Women was created in 1996. It is a member organisation and this is an interesting model for Teja, as they have members in different spheres in society (professors, activists, artists ...). They also organised a festival with the same name in 1995. They created it with the aim of positioning women in a predominantly patriarchal environment at that time. The organisation later became ‘non-institutional’. They have no fixed space. The idea is to be in other spaces (ranging from completely self-organized spaces to institutions), to squat the city and take place for ideas. It managed to squat these different positions and places. Also social spaces, with people and places who have little contact with ‘art’. They worked on the distribution of money, and thought about an egalitarian system where responsibilities are shared. The way in which people are involved is regarded equally (also in economical terms), so there is no hierarchy or pay gaps.

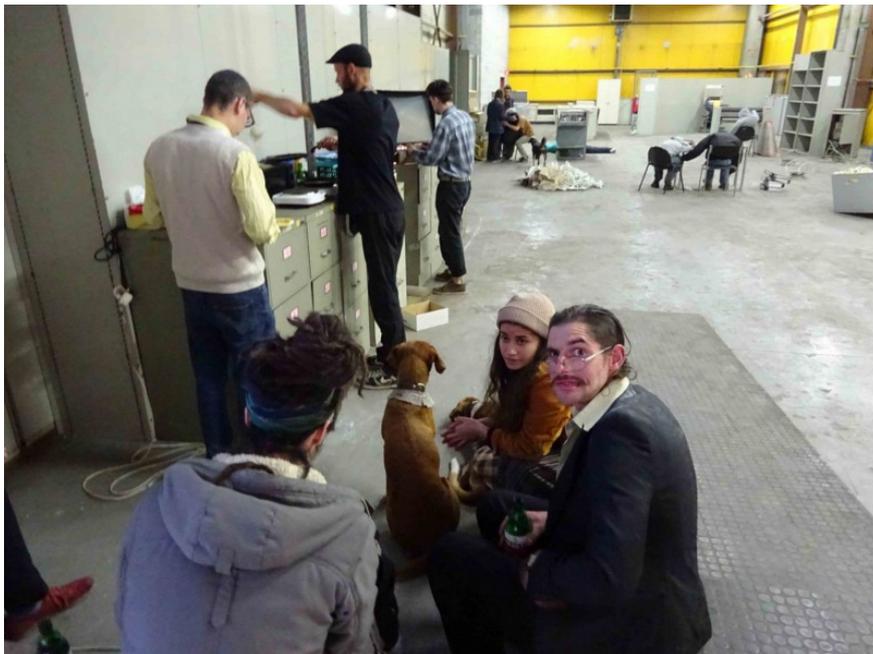
Geert Opsomer, RITCS, Belgium

Geert is a dramaturge, pedagogue, teacher and art worker among other things. He wants to talk about the freelancers of the future and shares some practices of Transfo Collect and KAK, both based in Brussels. Transfo Collect gathers young people from different subcultures, who do not have an easy access to art or art education because of their cultural or social background, but who wish to develop artistic projects. KAK (Koekelbergse Alliantie van Knutselaars) is a bunch of *bricoleurs*, theatre makers and thinkers who created a common platform to create work and dialogue.

Geert states that we are all embodying the system, but more than that: we are also psychologically internalizing the system. The whole apparatus is touching upon our psyche, our mental state. Maybe the re-enactments of situationism can be a tool or a source of inspiration here.

Geert discusses some strategies:

1st strategy—the insertion of playfulness in everyday life, the profanation of it



TOESTAND is an organisation that re-activates abandoned or forgotten buildings or terrains, by (socio-cultural) actions or interventions. They try to reach people that art is not usually reaching. In 2015, TOESTAND and KAK occupied the former Renault plant and did performances, among others a re-enactment of a board.

KAK tends to stay for a longer time in the same place. They occupied buildings in Kuregem (slaughterhouse area). What is important to them is this durability, to be there for a year and to establish a link with the people living there.

He mentions two other performances: 'Agence de Tourisme / Safari' in the neighbourhood of Kuregem, a district where there is a lot of black market and difficulties, and 'Manifestation against oneself'. They had to go after a couple of minutes, because it was not allowed to manifest against oneself ...

2nd strategy—artistic settlement in the public space

Geert talks about 'La République—très, très démocratique—de Gondwana', which was the creation of a fictional state, in which artists worked in the neighbourhood of the market place/slaughterhouse of Kuregem. They had an office in both Kinshasa and Brussels and created a temporary, utopian republic.

3rd strategy—reclaiming the education / re-thinking the school



Transfo Collect uses the space of art institutions in the weekends and holidays. Geert gives an example of one of their actions: artistic interventions in Villa Empain (Empain was one of the big Belgian capitalists). Transfo Collect and KAK created among others a raft on the swimming pool (see picture) and a house in the rich gallery.

There is no time to discuss the other strategies: para-site activities / occupations / to appear in existing structures and new cartographies.

But some questions that pop up are: how far can you go? If you really want to be effective, do you have to surpass this border between legal—illegal? And: how to resist recuperation?

Aleš Mendiževc, Radio Študent, Slovenia

Aleš works for the independent student radio, that has existed since 1969. He was asking himself how you can write critique in a neoliberal context. He starts from the disposition that everyone is his own entrepreneur. This combination of individualism and entrepreneurship makes that we are at every moment a real capitalist.

In institutions, there is no place for real critical work—you have academies and then media but there you cannot have a permanent job. Former approaches do not work anymore: accepting the neoliberal production modus, or hyper-production which means that you have to cover everything. But the punk era is over as well—just say ‘fuck you’ does not work either. In an age where politicians have become cynical, this is not effective anymore.

They choose for another way, rejecting the notion of hyper-production and refusing to be entrepreneurs. People writing critique or working for the radio have to find other forms of employment. These different ways of getting paid allow them to keep writing. In some way, they are the heroes of everyday life.