

# esc medien kunst labor



Opening Speech

**Marina Grzinic (Ljubljana, Vienna)**

**A street talk: To act in support of those who  
struggle for a life with dignity requires bravery  
and responsibility**

Opening Speech:

Marina Grzinic (Ljubljana, Vienna)

## **A street talk: To act in support of those who struggle for a life with dignity requires bravery and responsibility**

Published under GFDL - GNU Free Documentation License

September 12<sup>th</sup>, 2013

esc media art laboratory

Opening Speech: Marina Grzinic, Ljubljana, Vienna

First, it is very important to state that the trajectory of the shifting, relocating of spaces of **esc media art laboratory** presents a certain precise travelogue of work, dedications, programs and struggles. The **esc media art laboratory** has come to the center (of Graz) BUT is not de-centered.

In all these years **esc media art laboratory** has presented a very consistent work in elaborating its concept, working despite all the obstacles. What does this concept consist of? What does this re-taking, re-elaborating, re-negotiating, re-building of a proper position consist of? It is a precise politics of intervention, and this means a vision of a socially transformative art that intervenes in concrete social and cultural spaces. In this case not only in Graz but in a much wider context, considering the important international and intranational programs in all these years of the **esc media art laboratory**. It intervenes without speculations; on the contrary it has a strong history of materialization, of living, imprinting a proper position in the city of Graz.

But the time, the now-time, when **esc media art laboratory** has moved to the center (that has to be rethought as well, considering what the center is and what the periphery is today) is also a time of disintegration. The former (as they like to call themselves), and I therefore repeat, the “former” western European states (that are the first capitalist states, also all direct and indirect colonial states and anti-Semitic states as well), which pushed the vision of welfare states after WWII, are increasingly putting pressure on their own citizens, pushing them into debts, misery, precarity and the normalization of control. The welfare nation-state’s public funds are cut or are unavailable for the public good through more or less hidden processes of privatization in all possible forms. Depending on the place from which we speak, in which nation-state we live in the European Union.

Therefore to resist and practice a politics of a social transformation, exchange, collaboration and to demand free communication in the art and cultural context is a very important point of departure here and now. This is at the core of the **esc media art**

*laboratory.*

Though the outsides (in plural) are pressing on all of us. Those who are citizens and yet pushed toward the limits still “enjoy” benefits, for example that of going to the polls, of not(yet) being deported , etc. But my question is what is going on when we ask for the outcome of the processes of queering citizenship? I use queer as with and through the esc media art we formed ourselves in the powerful politics of cyber-feminism and Donna Haraway's important concept of situated knowledge.

Queering citizenship means that we have to ask ourselves, what is the status of our citizenship when we have second-class citizens around us, a vast territory of a migrant labour force that has been present in the EU historically for decades and that has substantially contributed to our good life, but is pushed to the margins, discriminated, made invisible, etc.

Radicalizing the queering of citizenship also means asking what is going on with those who have no “RIGHTS” to EU citizenship at all? With this radicalization I want to propose the situation of maximum excess.

When I say “the situation of maximum excess” I do not think simply of a collapse of the social and political or even an economic collapse (the financialization of capital that never stopped and made us just “human capital”) after 2008. I want to say that beside all these troubled citizens of the European fortress, at least we are citizens, and as you have to be at least a citizen of one of the EU-states to be part of the European nation, people exist who do not have this privilege, and are therefore in the position of being non-citizens, which means being refugees, asylum seekers, or being illegalized, without rights, being secluded or kept just at the level of not yet dying , but not living either, with a life without any dignity at all.

In the book *Moments of Excess: Movements, Protest and Everyday Life* (Pm Press, UK 2011) by the collective Free Association, we can read “these days we are no longer satisfied with symbolic protest – which can almost be seen as militant lobbying. Our movement is leaning towards a more constitutive politics. People are beginning to work out what they want, what they are for, not only what they are against. What is more, people are actually ‘acting’ for what they want: practice not just theory.” This practice then becomes very concrete: I want to talk therefore about the refugees crisis here and now.

It started in November 2012, when refugees began to protest in Austria. At the center of this protest lies the formation of the Refugee Protest Camp in Vienna, which started with a ten-hour march of approximately a hundred refugees and their supporters. The march, which took place on November 24, 2012, started at the refugee reception center in Traiskirchen (around 20 km away from Vienna) and ended at the Vienna city center. The march resulted in the erection of the Refugee Protest Camp, which included tents, a kitchen, and activities in Sigmund Freud Park, in front of the Votive Church, in the center of Vienna.

The demands of the refugees are better living conditions, from adequate food to a decent social life: the right to stay and the right to work. For too long refugees have been caught in a situation of systematic abandonment. Their living conditions in the EU have gradually

deteriorated. They have been the victims of a process of racial discrimination that has diminished and depoliticized the concept and the status of human rights.

The Refugee Protest Camp was cleared by police on December 28, 2012. After negotiating with personnel from the Votive Church, the refugees entered the church themselves. As nothing had been offered to them at that point by the authorities regarding their demands, a group of refugees went on a hunger strike. On the January 22, 2013, the refugees stopped the hunger strike for 10 days in order to recover and rethink the issues.

On the next day, on January 23, 2013, they held a press conference and stated that the struggles and the hunger strike will continue until their demands are fulfilled.

In March 2013 the refugee activists moved out from the Votive Church into the former Servite Monastery in Vienna. This was a new step as a part of the negotiation with the archdiocese in order to get a safer space and to continue the refugees' struggle as a possibility to reopen the dialog with the Austrian government.

At the press conference held on March 4, 2013, the refugees declared that their new home would not be a small »Traiskirchen« [a refugee camp with the function of isolating refugees from society], but another step towards the solution of their problems.

In August 2013, 8 activists of the Vienna refugee protest movement were deported to Pakistan, 12 other persons are in danger of being deported very soon. The Austrian Ministry of Interior Johanna Mikl-Leitner justified the deportations by stating that not all regions in Pakistan are dangerous and that especially those regions, where the deported refugees are from, are secure. Some journalists took a closer look and reported that some of the regions into which the activists were deported are considered to be among the most dangerous in Pakistan.

With one word, the situation is horrible. But it is not imaginary. We have very concrete dates, everything is documented. This life-threatening situation for the refugees demands concrete actions against the repressive politics and for solidarity with the self-organized movement in this city, in this state, in the EU and in the world. Therefore to act in their support is a clear sign of understanding a proper position as well and also of understanding that their demands are for a common life with dignity.

The actions of the refugees show that there are not two types of human beings, citizens and non-citizens. Either we are all citizens or we are all non-citizens! This conclusion was stated in a public talk by Mohammad Numan, a refugee himself and an activist from the Refugee Protest Camp in Vienna. He implored the Austrian public: "You are citizens that support our demands. Therefore, why don't you demand that your political representatives – who you, as citizens, have elected – change this unbearable situation?!" The response was complete silence.

The refugees did not ask for "some" rights that would allow them to enter and maybe participate in the space of politics and the social. They were not captive to an old modernist idea of politics, waiting for their place in the political arena, for a place reserved only for those already considered as belonging to the political space – for

example, nation-state citizens with their form of good life (a “good” life that deteriorates for them as well in times of crisis).

Instead, the refugees’ action came as a surprise, and it opened up the possibility of demanding changes to the laws of EU nation-states. Moreover, their actions will force the NGOs and activists that support them to reorganize themselves and their struggle.

The refugees’ demands pose a set of questions and problems that target not only the biopolitical regimes of the “former” Western European countries of the EU, but the whole Western concept of human rights as it was developed after WWII. Until the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, human rights and asylum politics were predominantly used to reproduce the division between Eastern and Western Europe. The East was presented as a totalitarian realm, while the West was a place of democracy and respect for human rights. Human rights policy has been one of the main shields used by democratic capitalist regimes in the West to deflect discussions regarding the fascist reality of Western Europe after WWII.

The question of human rights started to visibly disintegrate after the fall of the Berlin Wall. After 1989, the emergence of global capitalism caused refugee and asylum policy in Europe to deteriorate. It is said that the employment restrictions imposed in the EU today are meant to protect the citizens of the EU, especially in Western Europe, so their living standards do not decline. We are well aware that wages have remained stagnant for a decade. Protests in the public spaces of European democracy are frequently suppressed by police and military forces (authorized by laws that originated in colonial times, as is the case in France). In her text “French Suburbia 2005: The Return of the Political Unrecognized,” Rada Iveković writes: “When the [French] government reactivated the law about the state of emergency [in 2005], passed during the Algerian war in 1955, the French learned that colonial legislation had never been abrogated in the first place.” (See Rada Iveković, “French Suburbia 2005,” in *New Feminism: Worlds of Feminism, Queer and networking Conditions*, ed. M. Gržinić and R. Reitsamer, Vienna: Löcker, 2008.)

In the biopolitics of the West, citizens are strongly differentiated in terms of class, gender, and race – differentiations, discriminations, and exploitations that multiply globally. This is not just a question of “diversity,” as it is constantly presented to the public. On the contrary, the former proletariat has changed into a precariat, and increasingly sees itself as “the wretched of the earth.” The perspective of the world seen from the side of the colonized, as formulated in Frantz Fanon’s famous work written during the Algerian anti-colonial struggle of the 1960s, shows that EU biopolitics are constantly reproduced by and through necropolitics.

As Achille Mbembe wrote in reference to the dispossession of life in Africa, “global capitalism cannot expand without what we should call massive racial subsidies or discounts.” As Mbembe points out, “[capitalism] needs to work through and across different scales of race as it attempts to mark people either as disposable or as waste. It needs to produce, order, segment, and racialize surplus or superfluous populations to strategic effect.” (See Achille Mbembe, “Theory from the Antipodes: Notes on Jean & John Comaroffs’ TFS,” in *Theorizing the Contemporary* (2012).)

The list of capitalism's victims is divided from within. Some victims have a higher status, while others are unimportant. Structural racism is the core logic of global capitalism. Racialization is its internal administrative, judicial, and economic procedure, which regulates the space of financial capitalism as well as the system of representation, theory, and discursivity. Racism is not just identity politics but something internal to the whole agenda of the transformation of the nation-state under global capitalism. It is possible to argue that EU states are racial states, as demonstrated by the way they have managed refugee and asylum politics.

What is to be done? Aigul Hakimova, an activist from the Social Center Rog in Ljubljana is clear, when she elaborates on this question. She states: "We have to re-open the issue of migration, to mobilize, to start working on alternative economies, such as co-operatives. In fact we have to make alliances; we have to travel a lot, to learn, to somehow be part of a larger movement, not of a political party, or a syndicalist union, but part of simple social movements from below, grassroots movement. Some countries have a very strong tradition in this regard. It is also necessary to experiment, to go a little over the border that lies ahead, to cross the limit. The future of the EU in the light of what is currently happening is open for battles. Over uprisings, struggle, people will come up with better rights. Otherwise, we will be a Babylon, in terms many love to use it, as some people will always remain at the margins, and we will witness to the constant cyclical reproduction of the capitalist elite, but without this interface."

Yes, it is true, to act in support and together with those who struggle for a life with dignity requires bravery and responsibility and a clear political concept.

And what is global capitalism doing today? It radically transforms the coordinates of time, space and the subject. As Jonathan Crary states in his book *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, alluding not to 9/11 but to the 24/7 that means service available 24 hours a day and 7 days a week, regardless of time or day, by a supermarket, convenience store, or...elderly care by migrants or cheap migrant undocumented servant work, to a condition of a screen time, for those who have phones, computers, iPad's "magical window" etc. Crary states that all these gadgets put us in a state of constant alert, a state of "a disabled and derelict diachrony" that prevents us from engaging in anything important. (See Jonathan Crary, *24/7 Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, Verso, 2013). Crary suggests a way to escape this, what I have termed a prison of an artificial time that only produces itself, saying "take a time for yourself". BUT I argue differently: "do not take time for yourself, BUT make time for the other!". That means, as argued by Beatriz Preciado, a critical awakening of the »proletariat of feminism« whose monstrous subjects are whores, lesbians, raped, butch, male and transgender women who are not white ... in short, almost all of us.

In short, the question of time defines the terms of *the social and political* possibilities to create conditions for different formats of arts and activation. The possibility to reconsider time and resources is one of the topics that stays in front of **esc media art laboratory** in order to rethink what and how it is to be done consistently and compellingly regarding art, community and work.