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POSTIDENTITY AND THE AESTHETICS OF AFFECT IN THE WORK OF TANJA OSTOJIĆ

Apstrakt: *Tema rada je analiza savremenog umetničkog opusa Tanje Ostojić u odnosu na aspekte teorijskog rada Gilles Deleuzea i njegovo shvatanje identiteta. Rad Tanje Ostojić je istraživao u smislu veza koje ona uspostavlja sa različitim socio-kulturološkim pitanjima kao što su imigracija, problemi struktura vlasti u umetničkim i društvenim pojmovima, pol, kritike kapitalizma. Ostojićeva vešto upravlja tim, često spornim, idejama i stvara kompaktni umetnički izraz.*

Ključne reči: *Tanja Ostojić, identitet, performans, Gilles Deleuze, relaciona estetika*

Key words: *Tanja Ostojić, identity, performance, Gilles Deleuze, relation aesthetics*

Tanja Ostojić is a contemporary Serbian artist who is no stranger to problems of identity. In her work she questions and challenges power relations and their permutations within the realms of politics, culture, and art. Ostojić's work spans more than ten years and encompasses a variety of artistic engagements, from performance works in which she covered her naked body with marble dust and stood in the middle of an art gallery, to works such as *I'll Be Your Angel* in which she accompanied 49th Venice Biennale curator Harald Szeemann as his escort. As a performance artist of the younger generation, Ostojić successfully navigated the perilous and turbulent 1990s in Serbia

when the country was gripped by armed conflict and immersed in the transition to a Western-style democratic socio-political system. Like several earlier-generation of performance artists such as Marina Abramović or Milica Tomić, Ostojić's work touches on the intersection of the body, politics, ideology, and representation. However, unlike Tomić or Abramović – whose works deal with aspects of identity related to the media, to the legacies of communist ideology, or the new capitalist mass culture – Ostojić more intimately engages her body, bringing to light the redistribution of libidinal desire into socio-cultural realms. Ostojić's entire oeuvre questions the positioning of the female body within powerful networks of public exchange, such as immigration bureaus, welfare offices, schools, international art organizations, and other institutionalized spaces. Although all of these networks are supposedly spaces in which women are equal and free (at least in the West), Ostojić shows time and time again that these are actually constructs – pointing out that even in the Western most liberated spaces, women's bodies are always already placed in a category, marked as transgressional, and in some cases even labeled as pornographic.

Questioning identity is one of Ostojić's primary goals, and her work can be understood as queering the very notion itself. Slovenian theorist Marina Gržinić argues that queer "is 'that' something in-between gender and sex, that allows us to say that something is not quite right, neither woman nor man, and that connects both toward a radical positioning of life and the medium, art and culture."¹ Along these lines, Ostojić performs an almost Deleuzian deterritorialization of identity. Two works, in particular, the *After Courbet L'origine du Monde* poster/billboard from 2004 and *Be My Guest*, a 2001 performance and video work, showcase Ostojić's constant reversal of familiar categories.

For *Be My Guest*, from 2001, the artist rearranged the floor of the gallery Pallazo delle Esposioni in Rome, placing a hot tub in the middle of the room. The invitations sent out for the show announced that the show would be an informal gathering with food and drinks. Awaiting the visitors when they arrived at

¹ M. Gržinić, *Queer Politics: Identity, Sexuality and Europe*, *Journal For Politics Gender and Culture* 2, Winter (2003), 64.

the gallery, however, was something quite different: Ostojić was sitting in the hot tub, together with the show's curator Bartolomeo Pietromarchi. Food was served at and around the tub while Ostojić and Pietromarchi, both naked, proceeded to engage in what appeared to be sexual games. Marina Grzinic argues that such entwinings of art and sexuality in fact constitute instances of over-identification—what Grzinic calls “traversing the fantasy”—and of incarnation.² By way of this over-identification, I would argue, Ostojić has pushed the fantasies around art making, as well as the institutional power games involved in exhibition and promotion of art to their limit by engaging in displays of sexuality right on the gallery floor. Even more, this openly sexual behavior involved the curator of the show, thus pushing the already-charged art-curator relationship into the fantasmic game. In this libidinal scene, Ostojić stages a becoming one with the curator also symbolic of the artist becoming one with her audience. The act of simulated copulation is an act of becoming other. Staging this fusion within the context of the Western gallery institution, Ostojić has thus inverted the usual ‘order of things,’ brazenly calling into question the inherent power relations of the gallery – a dynamic in which the male Western curator, and the enlightened Western gallery goers, usually share the ‘upper’ hand. In *Be My Guest*, Ostojić has overtaken the space of the gallery and inverted her relationship with both the audience and the curator. Instead of watching a show, audience members become participants in a group sex act, while the gallery/curator have been reduced to a mere props for the artist.

In exposing the power games inherent in art institutions, Ostojić is similar to an artist such as Andrea Fraser. Unlike Fraser, however, Ostojić brings another element into the equation. Her position as an Eastern European female artist only further complicates the curator-artist relationship, exposing the often patronizing attitudes that the West has towards the East.

As Grzinic argues, another important element of this work is Ostojić's strategy of incarnation. Grzinic states that “over-identification is played in front of our eyes in ‘flesh’ (incarne) and ‘hot’ blood.”³ The strategy of incarnation, common to many perfor-

² Ibid, 73.

³ Ibid, 74.

mance artworks, is an event, in this case an event in which the audience becomes the artist's lover and departs from their usual voyeuristic position. At one point during the initial performance of *Be My Guest*, art critic Ludovico Pratesi jumped into the tub, finally crossing the sacred threshold between the artist and the critic with his own flesh. Thus, it can be seen that by destabilizing her own role within the gallery and art institutions, by refusing to conform to the script, Ostojić destabilized the roles of the other players, as well. Through these transgressions of the norm, Ostojić also creates what Deleuze calls "the Figure." Although *The Logic of Sensation* is a text written about painting, quite traditional form, it touches upon some of art's more universal qualities, as well. In his description of Bacon's work, Deleuze uses the term "Figure" to describe the ways in which the artist's work traverses the strict representational apparatus of Western painting and engages the viewer by passing to her the force of sensation. Through the exchange of forces between different bodies (the body of the artwork, the body of the artist, and the body of the viewer), an artwork produces what can be termed a spasm an instance of becoming something else. Deleuze writes on this relationship in Bacon's work:

"The body exerts itself in a very precise manner, or waits to escape from itself in a very precise manner. It is not I who attempts to escape from my body, it is the body that attempts to escape from itself by means of ... in short, a spasm: the body as plexus, and its effort or waiting for a spasm."⁴

Like Bacon's paintings, Tanja Ostojić's works become a Deleuzian plane on which an array of forces multiply and complicate, and the term "Figure" describes the transmission of these forces to the viewer. Unlike Bacon, however, Ostojić creates the Figure through her own body, drawing the audience deeper and deeper into a shared experience that offers no place for spectators, but only accomplices. In this respect, Ostojić's *Be My Guest*, in particular, can be thought along the lines of performance projects such as Guillermo Gómez-Peña's *La Pocha Nostra*.

Tanja Ostojić also deploys and mobilizes an aesthetics of affect as a way to connect with the audience and

⁴ G. Deleuze, *Pure Immanence: Essays on a Life*, New York, 2005, 15.

shatter the usual object/subject or viewer/work relationship. Her work mobilizes affect by situating the body as both the site of affect production and the site of affect reception.

Affect could be characterized as a connecting line between the work, the artist, and the viewer. Ronald Bogue argues that the affect, as described by Deleuze, is the instance of “becoming other” through which the artists are able to “render palpable in the work of art the impalpable forces of the world.”⁵ Art embodied in such a manner goes beyond a purely phenomenological approach. Deleuze argues that sensation is at once turned towards the subject (embodied in instinct, temperament, and nervous system) and towards the object (reflected in the facts, events, and places). In its affect, the work is not just a disengaged objet d’art, but creates a series of connections through which it and the viewer reach “the unity of the sensing and the sensed.”⁶ Traditional metaphysical notions of identity and subjectivity are shattered in this unity, and a new aesthetics engaged – the aesthetics of affect.

Tanja Ostojić’s 2004 poster, *After Courbet L’origine du Monde*, is an example of how the aesthetics of affect can implicate the politics of identity. This work addresses the problematics of illegal/legal immigration and sex-trade of women from Eastern Europe. Most importantly, the work mounts a critique of the ways in which these women and their bodies are codified and labeled within a Western European context. The work also addresses the history of art by quoting a famous (dead male) artist. Ostojić’s original installation of the work consisted of a large poster foregrounding the lower portion of the artist’s torso. The poster was exhibited on a number of billboards in Vienna and in Stadtpark in Graz. Unlike in Courbet’s painting, Ostojić’s body is not nude in the poster; rather, she is wearing panties in a recognizable shade of blue with the twelve stars of the European Union prominently displayed over her pubic area. What is interesting about the work, and what adds to its affect, is the reception it garnered when it was first displayed: the poster was immediately pronounced por-

⁵ R. Bogue, *Deleuze on Music, Painting and the Arts*, New York and London: Routledge 2003, 165.

⁶ B. Massumi, *The Autonomy of Affect, Parables of the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*, Durham and



Posters on Gustave Courbet's *L'Origine du Monde*, 2004, poster, artist's collection.

nographic and a weeks long scandal ensued. As Ostojčić herself noted, what was ironic about this scandal was that there was absolutely no nudity in the image. Indeed, it does not even compare to many much more explicit images circulating in everyday media. The reasons for the poster's reception in Austria, therefore, can only lie in the affective play that it created between the artist's sexuality and the public space it inhabited. The poster's explicit and political linking of sexuality and nationhood offended the public. More than just a representation dealing with the libidinal relationship between sex, identity, and nationhood, the larger-than-life billboard also extended itself out, subsuming the space around it to its bold content. Perhaps most importantly, this enormous Eastern European vagina stood as an unavoidable reminder of the numerous Eastern European women

(as well as women from other non-Western countries) who are often abducted or tricked into illegally crossing the border between Eastern Europe and Austria to either work in Western European brothels or as servants, earning minimal pay in almost slave-like conditions.

One could argue that the formal elements of the aesthetics of affect are important for a better understanding of this work. What I mean by the formal elements are those which can be labeled as the non-representational aesthetic codes such as cropping, lighting, color, etc. These non-representational signs/codes, as cinema theorist Richard Dyer describes them, are perceived on the level of structuration, or its formal qualities, and not signification.⁷ The non-representational sign moves us, but very often we are not sure why. Brian Massumi calls affect an event or a happening that is ultimately about intensity. Indeed, the formal elements which structure Ostojić's poster – her close cropping of the body, the choice of underwear, the mimicking of canonical artwork, and its size – build a series of supra-cognitive events that entice intense, even physical responses in the viewer/participant. "The body doesn't just absorb pulses or discrete stimulations; it infolds contexts, it infolds volitions and cognitions that are nothing if not situated," Massumi writes.⁸ If we follow his argument, we might say that the specific formal elements Ostojić deploys in her poster create zones of intensity that, in turn, function in our in-between spaces – spaces where the cognitive side of us has not yet understood what the body has already infolded. More importantly, the fact that the image is sexual in nature makes this supra-cognitive reception of the work even more potent, as the viewer finds himself always already a part of the Other the poster depicts – that is to say, the vagina itself. Perhaps this subconscious functioning of the poster was the reason that the work was publicly denounced in such a ferocious way and placed in the newspapers alongside the pornographic news.

On another level, Ostojić's poster also creates a kind of formal push and pull as we are invited to "enter" the work, but are also pushed out of it by its over-

⁷ R. Dyer, *Entertainment and Utopia, Only Entertainment*, London and New York: Routledge 1992, 19.

⁸ Massumi, *The Autonomy of Affect*, 30.



An excerpt from an Austrian newspaper article about Ostojić's work. 2004

whelming size and taboo subject matter. This formal push and pull of forces makes the viewer highly aware of the texture of the work. Richard Dyer argues that it is in the nature of non-representational signs to be iconic. Instead of a signifier and the signified being related in terms of any sort of physical resemblance,⁹ their relationship in non-representational signs is established through a kind of structural resemblance. This means that viewers make their way in and through the work by relating to the structure of the feeling it produces – its affect- rather than by way of any clear resemblance to recognizable visual signs.

This brings me to the ways in which Ostojić's work functions in the realm of the so-called relational aesthetic. With her interventions in various public spaces, the viewer is immersed into the art object and she or he becomes involved with its affect or otherwise interpellated into its specificity. An artistic practice employing this strategy is inevitably embodied, standing against traditional epistemology. Relational aesthetics calls for a critique of the self-contained subject that ultimately shatters the binary opposition of subject and object. In *The Transmission of Affect*, Theresa Brennan argues that affect can in this respect be seen as a critique of the Western epistemological and metaphysical philosophies whose many embodiments throughout the centuries have focused

⁹ R. Dyer, *Entertainment and Utopia*, 20.

on the individual, autonomous subject whose emotional life is strictly self-contained. Ineed, Brennan writes, “we are...peculiarly resistant to the idea that our emotions are not altogether our own.”¹⁰ Social in its origins, the transmission of affect through what Brennan calls the ‘sharing of emotions’ can also be both biological and physical. Ostojić’s billboard plays precisely with this relationship between the political and the affective being and places itself into a social relationship with the viewer, one in which that viewer is pulled into the folds of the work. Because of its size and placement in a public, commercial space, the space of the poster is extended into the viewer’s space, real space. These forms of artistic practice, whether poster-making, video works, or performance events, by their very nature elude regular systems of commodity exchange and the art market. Therefore, Ostojić’s works, either through their content, through the production of affect, or vis-à-vis exhibition/curatorial practices, engage the social and the political, proving that the affective is also political. In short, this can be called relational aesthetics.

In Tanja Ostojić’s art, which often picks a libidinal fantasy as its organizing element, the viewer’s surrender to the affect of the work means a surrender to its often controversial politics. More importantly, such an artistic engagement creates a spasm, a fluid zone of forces and intensity through which the plane of immanence is reached and is in “an absolute immediate consciousness whose very activity no longer refers to a being but is ceaselessly posed in a life.”¹¹ Hence, Ostojić’s work produces both visibility and political engagement through a careful complicity with and complicated positioning of the artist’s body in relation to both the audience and the networks of art and power within which work and audience encounter one another.

¹⁰ T. Brennan, Introduction, *Transmission of Affect*, Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press 2004, 2.

¹¹ G. Deleuze, *Pure Immanence: Essays on a Life*, New York 2005, 27.