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Politicizing and rewriting counter histories: for a new politics of empowerment and interventions

For this edition of the festival I propose a condensed program of 8 positions. The work that describes them is presented through a selection of video and films, shorts and features, documentaries and experimental productions. I can think of a typical title for this program: politicizing and rewriting counter-histories that attack the hegemonic, discriminatory and racialized regime of whiteness, the binaries of heterosexuality, and the naturalization of nation-State citizenship. The program questions heavily racialized labor divisions and the naturalized histories of colonialism and contemporary forms of coloniality (colonialism without colonies). These processes are an outcome of capital's racialization (a system of racism, discrimination and dispossession) and are directly connected with the almost-forgotten colonialism and its almost universalized and accepted imperial war machine and the militarization of every level of the social, economic and political in the present state of neoliberal financial global capitalism.

Global neoliberal financial capitalism, with its processes of financialization, appropriates the places of art and culture as spaces for the direct laundering of money, as well as heavily exploits the new economy of attention that uses affective labor as an intrinsic part of the system of reproduction of global capitalism in a form of unprecedented dimensions for new neoliberal global accumulation modes of capital and power. Images and (non-)narratives, especially those at the center of mass-culture show business productions and at the center of accumulated digitalized imageries, contribute heavily to a financialization of life, subjectivities, affect and labor.

The program is not conceived as a specialist film curatorial selection, but these videos and films are proposed in order to constitute a paradigmatic space of intervention where social, political, and also esthetic contradictions are profoundly articulated to develop proposals for opposing the intensified militarization of our lives, the processes of steady racialization and discrimination and the measures with which prevent alternative, counter-histories from being re/written. Therefore the program brings into the center the political status of the image and narratives that present key contradictions of global neoliberal financial capitalism. The authors included are Adela Jušić, Lana Čmajčanin, Nevline Nnaji, Anja Salomonowitz, Heiny Srour, Aina Šmid, Zvonka T. Simčič and Marina Gržinić. It is possible to state that there are 3 lines at the center of the program, lines which are also topical for global capitalism: life and the intensified militarization of life, politics and labor, the status of the human and the processes of dehumanization as a result of the capitalist war machine, and, last but not least, the question of freedom, agency of migration, and the agency of the LGBTQ population in the former Eastern European space, specifically the former Yugoslavia, and the agency, empowerment and positions of the Black women's movement in the US.

In all three exposed lines it is possible to capture not just differences, but processes of violent racialization and discrimination, exploitation and dispossession that press heavily on not (yet) written political histories and political subjectivities. In the program reflections on such histories and subjectivities take a center stage.

One of the passages reworked by the authors in the film program is the passage from biopolitics to necropolitics. Biopolitics, coined by Michel Foucault in the 1970s as a mode of governing life, as a mode of managing life, which I translate (as briefly as possible) into “make live and let die,” was a way of governing life intended exclusively for the capitalist First (Western) world. Due to the pressing socialism all around it, the First capitalist world in the 1970s provided (though under hidden regimes of discipline for its fellow Western citizens), comfortable life facilities, just almost exclusively so for those perceived as “natural” citizens of the respective first-world capitalist nation-States. The other worlds were left to die, they were outside of the interest of the First capitalist world, until from time to time (and with varying frequency), of course, it was not necessary for the former imperial and colonial nation-States to suppress and redirect with military or paramilitary forces the decolonization struggles or attack socialism. This was the case when the “absolute democracy” of private property and surplus value, the two fundamental pillars of capitalism, were put under question. Therefore, the life on the other side of the Iron Curtain and on other continents was abandoned, and the former colonial Western imperial States let them die (as stated, “make live and let die”).

In parallel the migrants (from economic to political refugees) in the First capitalist world did not exist, being simply not included in any processes of democracy, and therefore it is not strange that they passed from their nonexistent position in the past, to an overtly and continually criminalized second-grade and non-citizen position in the present.

The 2013 film The 727 Days without Karamo by Anja Salomonowitz is a documentary concerning the current debate on asylum and migration laws and especially how these laws incapacitate those in Austria who embark into relations and marriages and form binational couples. It is a film where affective heterosexual and homosexual relations are trapped in meandering impossibilities, and where any decision for a nation-State citizen to have a relationship with somebody coming from the so-called Third-States, from Africa to Latin America, Asia and the non-Schengen States in Europe, presents not a challenge, but virtually a pure disaster. Destinies caught in violent measures of administration, families blocked, family members pushed into heavy misery, children separated from one of the parents and abandoned by State support measures -- these are the consequences of intimate relations with non-appropriate (meaning heavily racialized) partners. Severely pressed are those who were once seen as privileged citizens of the nation-State (in this case Austrians), who decided to break the unwritten law of global capitalism that is the law of brutal geopolitical divisions, which separate one from the other depending on which side of the colonial division we have found ourselves.

What we see today is a brutal intensification of the biopolitical regime of life from the 1970s. This intensification was named necropolitics by Achille Mbembe; it was conceptualized by Mbembe in 2003 based on his analysis of the condition of Africa as the post-colony. Necropolitics centers on new capital's logic and its processes of geopolitical demarcation of world zones, which are based on the mobilization of the war machine; necropolitics' accumulation of capital is a result of total dispossession and the subjugation of life to the power of death. Therefore, if Foucault's biopolitics, a term in-between bio (LIFE) and politics, can be designated in an axiomatic way as “make live and let die,” then necropolitics, a term in-between necro (DEATH) and politics, can be designated in an axiomatic way as “let live and make die.” It is a huge difference to make live, to provide structures and facilities for life, or just to let live. The latter presents the structure of a pure biopolitics of abandonment that is, in fact, necropolitics. The necropolitical now also punishes the natural nation-State citizens that are abandoned in the meanderings of laws and administration articles, where the

lives of those coming from the so-called "Third-States" and those of their partners start to be caught in vicious regimes of poverty, deprivation, seclusion.

Necropolitics regulates life through the perspective of death, therefore transforming life into a mere existence below the minimum standard of living. This process is exposed in a historical context in Nevline Nnaji's 2013 film Reflections Unheard: Black Women in Civil Rights. The film is a feature-length documentary that focuses on black women's marginalization between the Black Power and the Feminist movements in the United States. In the film powerful Black female voices of the past and present speak on former black female activists' experiences with racism in the Feminist movement, particularly their struggles dealing with a lack of empathy and understanding by the white feminists on issues that concern women of color. It also includes a wide range of archival footage from the 1960s and 70s, which displays the blatant differences in socioeconomic status and political concerns between white feminists and feminists of color.

Nnaji, in her overview of the Black women's movement in the US, shows the processes of black women's double discrimination status; they are subjugated not only to the 1970s patriarchal US capitalist system but also to a racialized gender division of labor. It shows that the black population in the U.S., and especially black women, were double-discriminated against and disposed; their access to the labor market was not only gender-biased, but they were also subjugated by processes of racialization. This means that every form of labor, agency and political activation in the U.S. and within the capitalist regime of whiteness is connected with racialization. This is possible to capture not only through a form of oral history, but by including documentaries that were never meant to be part of any art form. The effects of such inclusion presents a history of labor, agency and politics not only unheard, but literally unseen. The film exposes that the necropolitical, in modes of abandonment, subjugation and racialization, was already present in the 1970s in the United States. Actually, as Nnaji exposes in her film, labor, class and gender are not just deregulated in and by capitalism, but also heavily racialized. The racialized humans (this new category of non-humans), that are also portrayed in Salomonowitz's film, today form new populations of poor people, populations of those seen as less human. These racialized populations are the new class. It is clear that neoliberal global financial capitalism, with its regime of whiteness, exponentially develops processes of abandonment of the structures of life and ferociously rejects demands for equality and life improvement.

The strongly racialized histories of the U.S. State and of the civil U.S. body are present here and now. The video film Relations: 25 Years of the lesbian group Škuc-LL, Ljubljana by Marina Gržinić, Aina Šmid and Zvonka T. Simčič presents processes of marginalization and the struggle for rights for the lesbian and LGBT community in Slovenia and in the former Yugoslavia. The film consists of interviews, documents, art projects, nightlife, political appearances, and critical discourses. The film also talks about Europe, global world capitalism and the status of lesbians today. Other topics that are covered are alliances, history, relations and alliances with feminism and gay, transgender, and queer movements, and AIDS and the grammar of homosexuality. It gives a harsh critique of discrimination, racism, and fascism in Europe today. The film shows the genealogy of the steady reproduction of the second-class position for certain citizens, a position which the lesbian and the LGBTQI population has been systematically confined to for decades. It is a testimony to the incredible power of the lesbian movement, as well, and to its artistic and cultural potential, critical discourses and emancipatory politics.

In Gržinić, Šmid and Simčič's film, as well as Nnaji's and Salomonowitz's films, oral histories are at the center; the construction of political positions is put forward in between fiction and documentary and with a central stage given to important actors and actants in the struggle for rights and agency.

This leads in to the next film in the program, Leila and the Wolves by Heiny Srour. Made in 1984, it is the only (in a manner of speaking) “historical” film, if we consider the date of its completion (1984) and that it took Srour seven years to finish it. Leila and the Wolves examines the often-hidden role of Arab women in contemporary Palestine and Lebanon, told with a structure similar to “Arabian Nights.” Srour stated, “Those of us from the Third World have to reject the ideas of film narration based on the 19th century bourgeois novel with its commitment to harmony. Our societies have been too lacerated and fractured by colonial powers to fit into those neat scenarios.”

The “wolves,” in this instance, are of the human variety: male predators who continue to wage wars, no matter the price to be paid. The film pushes forward a struggle for several emancipation politics; it asks for women's agency as a post-ethnic, de-patriarchal position, as a political stance that disconnects itself from an ethnic, religious, patriarchal context that is tightly connected with the colonialism in Palestine and the whole region of the Middle East and the Arab world. Srour's film presents a clear political demand to decolonize the colonial history of Palestine, which brutally subjugated history, agency, politics and life in Palestine. Imperial colonialism, with its imposition of war and violent processes of subjugation and dispossession, transformed the whole space into an exploited, segregated and racialized territory. The racialization and class differentiation and gender subjugation in the film are strongly based on patriarchal structures incapable of reading the revolutionary contribution of women in the decolonial struggle, and, in addition, the film shows that every aspect of society, from the myth to the archive, is re/constructed under the violent disciplinary gaze of colonialism. The colonialism in Palestine relates directly as presented in the film to the systematic, bureaucratic, state-sponsored persecution and genocide (Holocaust) of six million Jews and of other Europeans by the Nazi German regime and of its collaborators prior and in the time of the WWII. Two systems of brutal racialization, subjugation, and dispossession have built the Middle East/ the Arab world and Europe as presented in the film.

This intensified, militarized colonialism and the machine of war (which regulates gaze, affects and life) also relates to the video works by Adela Jušić and Lana Čmajčanin. A selection of works done by Jušić and Čmajčanin, respectively, are included in the program, and their video performative collaborative project is also included in the program.

These works refer to a period that is known as the post-Dayton reality of Bosnia and Herzegovina, when, after the Dayton peace agreement in the mid-1990s, the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (that lasted from 1992-1995) came to an end. In the 1990s the former Yugoslavia was at the center of imperial wars initiated by different political elites and their paramilitary forces and supporters. The video works by Čmajčanin and Jušić refer to the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the genocidal logic tied to the conquest of territories and power inside the former Yugoslav space.

In order to give a precise view of the works, it is necessary to explain that Bosnia and Herzegovina was, on one side, captured and militarized by Slobodan Milošević, former Serbian orthodox nationalist turbo-genocidal politician, who was surrounded by a bloodthirsty military and political elites, and on the other, by a not-less-murderous Croat nationalist politician, Franjo Tuđman and his army, paramilitary formations and elites; in between these two poles “the rest,” Bosnians, remained, and transformed from a multicultural into a Muslim

entity. This schematic description resulted in a genocide by State army and paramilitary Serbian groups, who are responsible for the genocide in Srebrenica (8000 men and boys killed at once), and the torture, rape, and killing of thousands of Bosnian women. The war ended with the Dayton agreement, which also just sanctioned and institutionalized (in an international context) the war-predatory logic of the division of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The works of Jušić and Čmajčanin broach these topics fully, but also keep their searching nature. Like the other films and videos previously mentioned, they continue to look for ways to reinvent the performative and visual, the word spoken and the document imagined. In her 2005 video Female President, Lana Čmajčanin tells the shocking testimony of a young woman, raped and tortured during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, while mimicking the strong face and body gesticulations typical of politicians, orators and/or dictators. The text of the testimony is taken from the book "I Begged Them to Kill Me: Crime Against the Women of Bosnia-Herzegovina," published in the year 2000 by the Centre for Investigation and Documentation of the Association of Former Prison Camp Inmates of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sarajevo. Besides the shocking testimony, which awakens mixed emotions of sadness, empathy, anger and even shame, as we watch this video work, it also seems that the author strongly emphasizes the contrast between what we see and what we hear. Instead of compassion for a topic that nobody likes to talk about, The Female President provokes anger and political positioning, as the emptying of the content is done using the performative rhetorical modes of contemporary politicians in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the EU. They gesticulate and promise simply nothing, in a performative, exalted way.

Adela Jušić's video, The Sniper (2007), is about Jušić's father, who began serving in the Bosnian Army in 1992, and whose job it was to hunt down the Serbian snipers who were shooting at civilians. The work also reworks the status of parents and grandparents in the nearly 20 years since the war, and brings impressive visual solutions and challenging performative reconceptualizations. The sniper, Jušić's father, was meticulously recording the number of enemies killed in a notebook; the impact of becoming one of them is strongly re/conceptualized using a red dot on a screen (the starting point of Jušić's video animation) and an off-screen voice.

Adela Jušić's video, When I Die, You Can Do What You Want (2011), is all about the line of division between memory and history; where history fails, re/performed personal memories return with a vengeance. Jušić recorded herself coloring her grandmother's hair. After her grandmother passed away, Jušić wrote down all the stories her grandmother used to tell her, and this is presented off-screen, as the estranged narrative part of the work.

In Čmajčanin's and Jušić's collaborative video performance I Will Never Talk About the War Again (2011), which refers to the post-war situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the artists promise each other (as a performative ought) not to talk about the war anymore, while obsessively repeating the same sentence over and over. It is an obsessive performative statement that exposes the circularity conditioning the social, economic and political texture of Bosnia and Herzegovina today. After almost 20 years of the Dayton Peace Agreement, Bosnia and Herzegovina is still necropolitically subjugated to the war, as the specter that re/constructs the whole territory again and again, with its unwritten histories and forgotten atrocities, constantly pushing Bosnia and Herzegovina into oblivion and poverty; even now Bosnians are prevented from entering the EU freely and the country is divided (torn apart) by post-ultranationalist enclaves that again always incapacitate all those living there. Čmajčanin and Jušić expose all the possible emotions that result from constantly speaking about the war that is used by nationalistic parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina to hold on to power.

Coda: the program conceptually-politically consists only of female, transfeminist, transgender and transmigrant positions. The program questions topics, narratives, histories and fictions that are at the center of militant-black-post-white-transgender and transfeminist positions in film. These positions articulate different film and video formats and even more so an art and cultural practice that can produce pertinent projects for the future that harshly question and mercilessly antagonize the regime of capital's racialization, the regime of whiteness, the production of non-humans and the reproduction of poor populations, surplus or waste.

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