

espaivisor

gallery

SANJA IVEKOVIĆ WHAT DO WOMEN WANT? BEFORE OR AFTER?

Meditating on the work of **Sanja Iveković** (Zagreb, 1949) brings with it serious consequences. When going back over and examining a body of work begun in in the former Yugoslavia in the early seventies, a time when movements at odds with official art like Nova Umjetnička Praksa (New Art Practice) emerged, one must as a matter of course delve into a key chapter in the history of the past century. And, in so doing, one must pose questions on the social, economic and cultural differences between the socialist regime then in force in a country that no longer exists and the ruling neoliberal capitalism of today. In this regard, one can safely claim that the logic undergirding a substantial part of Sanja Iveković's proposals is sustained on a situated knowledge, which is to say on an inquiry carried out from a study of the surrounding local reality. It does so by means of a comparative method of evocating the past in order to sound out its traces and its continuance in the present or the changes that it could have produced in the current situation.

In addition, Iveković's art practice and her way of thinking entail, and this is a highly germane contribution, a critical or in other words feminist reading, on one hand of the lives of women at various moments and, on the other, of images of women produced by the cultural and advertising industries, two spheres in which the long, behaviour-shaping arm of patriarchal society can be detected. What's more, Iveković places herself at the core of her own work, as the first-person protagonist of some of her videos and performances.

Iveković's work calls for a digging up of the past to discover its implications and its impact but it does so from a consciousness that the world today is embroiled in the impositions of neoliberal commodification. Any individual—though not everybody is on the same social level or scale and the privileged few even praise and take profit of it—can suffer the blows of what the French intellectuals Christian Laval and Pierre Dardot have called "The New Way of the World." For someone like Sanja Iveković, who lived for several decades under a socialist system and the subsequent transition to capitalism based on privatization and the reduction of the public sphere in benefit of the private, underscoring commonality is a pressing concern.

For this exhibition in **espaivisor** called **What Do Women Want? Before and After**, without any pretensions to be exhaustive, Iveković explores the History of her country in uppercase but she also cuts through it from an optic that underlines the feminist idea that the personal is political. One can see this clearly enough in the video **Pines and Fir Trees. Women's Memories of Socialism**. Made in 2002, this work takes a documentary approach to an analysis,

centred on first-hand accounts, of the experiences of women under the socialism regime set in place after the Second World War and the victory of Tito's partisans.

This project encompasses the various periods Yugoslavia went through since the end of the war, including the time of nationalizations undertaken by the State and the redistribution of wealth, without forgetting events like the celebrations for 1st May or 8th March, as well as the role played by working brigades, a look at married life, the importance of public health, and so on. The documentary gathers the voices of five women with different ways of thinking and with equally different social statuses. Their stories are intertwined with extracts from reports and news from Yugoslavian television. And although, towards the end, the interviewees' appraisal of the contribution of socialism is generally positive, acknowledging the sense of comradeship, the high quality of the free public health service, as well as the perceived order in the behaviour of young people, and the existence of maternity leave, this video also addresses thorny issues that speak about the existence of detention centres like Goli Otok, where dissidents with Tito's government were re-educated and often subjected to violent treatment. On the other hand, the gender line is also visible in a regime that proclaimed equality between men and women in the 1946 constitution but which in practice assigned a preponderant role to men.

The video originated from a research project begun in 1999 by a group of scientists, lecturers and students at the Centre for Women's Studies in Zagreb.

In her desire to recover the legacy of women throughout the history of her country and particularly during the periods of transformations brought about by socialism, Iveković conceived **The Right One (The Pearls of the Revolution), 2007-2011**, a group of ten intervened photos arranged in two rows. In all the images one can see the same face in colour of a woman wearing makeup who rests her fist, in which she is holding a pearl necklace, against the side of her head. The model's left eye—and the choice of the side of the face is no accident—is covered by a black and white photo of two partisans. The artist seems to be challenging the beholder with the paradox of playing with images of women from different periods and opposing ideological positions. In addition, the model is emulating a gesture (fist against temple) which doesn't seem to fit into the recent context from which the unmistakably advertising image comes, instead seeming to suggest the Spanish and European left-wing salute from the thirties. This work appears to invite us to examine the past in order

to identify the correct position of the fist in times of revolution, given that the placement of the hand differs in the various colour photos.

Another of the works on show in Valencia presents a comparison of one single place in Zagreb whose appearance and function has changed in the process Iveković's country underwent as it abandoned socialism in order to embrace capitalism. Conceived as a slide projection and shown here on a screen, **Lost and Found, 2001-2004**, accentuates the idea of the passing of time and the idea of succession. Many companies and stores that were nationalized under socialism were re-privatized so that the names given to them in the past such as Pride, Progress, Solidarity, Freedom, Brotherhood were replaced by those of brands or shopping malls like Benetton, Gas, Core. As such, it is not a simple case of changing the name but a substantial transformation in ways of life introduced by neoliberal capitalism that have been coupled with increasing job insecurity and indifference towards the underprivileged at the present moment in time.

The interest in history and the distinct interpretations issuing from it underlie another of Iveković's works. I am speaking of **Lady Rosa of Luxembourg, 2001**, an extremely controversial project based on a monument commemorating the First World War in the capital of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, more specifically an allegorical female figure of victory known as Gëlle Fra (Golden Lady) which was built in 1923 to remember the soldiers who had fallen in the great war. Later destroyed by the Nazis, it was rebuilt in 1985, when a plaque was added with the names of the battles in which Luxembourgian soldiers had died in the Second World War and in the Korean War. It goes without saying that it is a particularly symbolic monument. With bold resolve, Iveković created a life-size replica albeit with a few substantial changes: the female figure is now pregnant and, in consequence, is divested of her erstwhile abstract, symbolic halo and has become palpable and real. Furthermore, the plaque on the bottom of the monument was altered by posters with texts in English, French and German containing words that alluded to culturally constructed stereotypes of women (Bitch, Whore, Madonna, Virgin); and others (résistance, liberté, indépendance, justice) with political connotations very different to the masculine, heroic quality of the monument to the fallen; and finally, others (Kultur, Kitsch, Kapital, Kunst) that spoke of the aesthetic value of the work and of its economic utility.

Carrying a feminist baggage that grows with the passing of the years, Iveković has exposed herself personally in her own work. In one of her best-known pieces, **Instructions # 1, 1976**, she undergoes beauty treatment. However, in a direction parallel to that taken by artists like Eleanor Antin and Ewa Partum, what she is actually doing is an operation of questioning the social obligation of wearing makeup in order to be a woman. After first drawing a number of lines with arrows and diagrams with ink on her face and neck, she then massaged her skin with her hands, erasing the drawings while at once darkening her face. The end result runs contrary to the sweetened vision of female beauty.

Many years later, she decided to record another video, this time called **Instructions # 2, 2015**. So, what changed in the meantime? There are some minor details such as the use of a pencil instead of the

brush from the seventies, but undoubtedly it leads to even more far-reaching conclusions: despite the intervening decades, the cultural pressure to continue making women victims of the ruling standards of beauty and of the impositions of cosmetics has by no means disappeared and, if anything, it has grown stronger.

Following this part-present discourse—starting with her seminal work **Before-After, 1976**—Iveković decided to recreate (or re-enact) the action from 1979 called **Triangle**. At that time the artist was photographed on the balcony of her apartment in Zagreb as she drank whisky, read a book and made masturbatory gestures, coinciding with a visit by President Tito to the city, putting herself at risk, as indeed happened, of a visit from the police who ordered her to leave the balcony and take the objects used with her. In 2005 the context was completely different. This time the visit was by fifteen presidents of European states to a summit in Croatia. The security measures were extreme—for instance, the use of mobile phones was forbidden—which meant that Iveković's attempts to call the Minister for Foreign Affairs, the local police station, the Croatian president and the Croatian parliament to announce the performance were curtailed. One of the photos shows the artist with a mobile in her hand while she holds a newspaper, in one way contravening the rules imposed.

The exhibition is brought to a close with a piece comprising twenty-two collages of images and documents: **On Witches (Isn't She Too Old for This?), 2013**, arranged in the following order: a drawing on the left and a photo on the right. On the left are reproductions of medieval etchings and drawings in which witches are seen as grotesque old women; facing them on the right Iveković has chosen photos of all kinds though with a common factor: they are all of women who rebel against the established order, who are empowered in their protean diversity; among them we could underscore Carolee Schneemann in Interior Scroll, demonstrations in the street, a couple of older women expressing their love for each other, and a protest calling for the liberation of Palestinian political prisoners. Also emerging from this proposal is the focus lent to the work within collective protest movements of women who are no longer young.

This piece condenses a large part of the stockpile of ideas with which Sanja Iveković works and which are patent in this exhibition: the past of the witch hunt and the disregard for the shared, communal knowledge of healers and custodians of learning, and the present in which, despite hegemonic sexism, women show signs of their dissent against the subordinate role assigned to them in the history of patriarchal culture and of capitalism.

Dissent in Images **Juan Vicente Aliaga**

¹ Christian Laval, Pierre Dardot, The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society. London – New York: Verso, 2013.

² This issue is addressed by Bojana Pejic in "Personal Cuts", Sanja Iveković. Selección d'obres. Barcelona: Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 2007, p. 238.

³ A new vision of the depictions of witches can be found in the essay by Silvia Federici, Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation. New York: Autonomedia, 2004.

espacio #1 – galería / space #1 – gallery

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WHAT DO WOMEN WANT? BEFORE OR AFTER?

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Ferías / Art Fairs:

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espaivisor gallery

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Horario:

De lunes a viernes, de 10.00 a 14.00h. y de 16.00 a 20.00h.

Sábado: cita previa



SANJA IVEKOVIĆ
INSTRUCTION #1, 1976
5'12" DVD / Video Beta / Black and White
Unlimited edition



SANJA IVEKOVIĆ
INSTRUCTION #2, 2015
4'53" DVD / Video Beta / Color / Sound
Unlimited edition