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Exhibition catalogue: *A Place Under the Sun*

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A Place Under the Sun

Andreja Kulunčić is one of Croatia's most internationally recognized artists, whose works are presented at some of the most established manifestations of contemporary art (Manifesta 4, 2002, documenta 11, 2002, 8 Istanbul Biennial, 2003, Liverpool Biennial, 2004, etc.) and owned by relevant contemporary art collections. Her artistic practice is characterized by a shift from expressing unbound creativity to the creation of new models of sociability and communication situations, an interest for socially engaged themes, confrontation with different audiences, and collaboration on collective projects. Although these ambitions are typical for different artistic attempts from the time of historical avant-gardes, and the idea that art work can be a potential trigger for participation has been generally accepted in today's institutional framework and theoretical discourse on contemporary art, as developed since the appearance of the happening, of Fluxus, of performance art and of Joseph Beuys's declaration that "everyone is an artist", in a local context it still provokes the rather futile question "but is this art?". The Croatian cultural establishment is still dominated by a representative understanding of culture in which there is a considerable mistrust for art which is not object-based, but rather process and anti-market oriented, and especially for art which problematizes and challenges the status quo of political, economic, social and psychological conditions prevailing in mainstream culture. The dominant cultural model in Croatia has institutions, a market and concepts based on Western models, but many elements of the modernist paradigm that have long been removed from the Western world, such as the notions of utopianism, formalist aesthetic values, the idea of the artist-hero, the transcendent character of art, the separation of art and life, art as opposed to theory, etc., still essentially form the system of art institutions, and not of any art institution in particular, but the institution of Art itself. In these circumstances, the exhibition *A Place Under the Sun*, a certain retrospective of works never shown in Croatia, reacts within the local context to the insufficient institutional support for contemporary art which critically reworks the tradition of the historical practices of experimental art such as was developed in its last metamorphosis in the period around 1968, as well as to the fact that in a situation in which these practices are considered marginal and "alternative", validation from the phantasmatic "West" is often the main means for securing "cultural capital" at the local level. Most of the works presented at the exhibition *A Place Under the Sun* evolved outside of Croatia, in relation to specific circumstances of exhibitions with curatorial conceptions focused on the "relevancy" of social and political meanings of the exhibition projects, as well as to the place the work was being made for. Their "translation" into a new exhibition demands the reactivation of their thematic complexes and aesthetic considerations, which triggers many questions central to current debates around artistic practices operating in the extended field of relational practices. (1)

As described in a recent essay by British critic Claire Bishop (2), these practices, which are currently happening under many names - socially engaged art, community art, experimental communities, dialogic art, research art, participatory, interventionist, collaborative art etc. - are less concerned with the relational aesthetic than with the creative rewards of collaborative activity, whether in the form of working with existing communities, or by establishing new interdisciplinary networks. Claire Bishop develops her critique on the opinion that the evaluation of these practices is too often dominated by ethical criteria, reduced to evaluating the quality of collaboration and participation (whereby the renunciation of the cult of authorship is ascribed automatic priority in terms of a critique of the art system and its markets), and points out that instead of demonstrating the experiences of transcendent human empathy which levels antagonisms in temporary social harmony, criticism should investigate the aesthetic effects of the work essential for a new perspective on the human condition. The insisting on criteria of critical evaluation of these practices as art (and not on the basis of their political attempts) could be seen as a symptom showing that the art world has grown tired of the changes

from the 90s onwards which enabled that a large part of art production be read as a politicization of the art field. But that cannot be said for activist and politically oriented critique, which claims that within the art system and the art world as we know it truly political and socially engaged activity is not possible at all (3). The structural similarities between late capitalism and conceptions of autonomous self-organization, until recently considered "alternative", as well as those between the managerial rationality of the ideal worker and the quality of flexible creativity that are ascribed to the figure of the artist, cancel any value automatically ascribed to a work of art understood as a "social form" whose values of collaboration, self-organization and interdisciplinarity support positive relations between people, and therefore are necessarily political and have an emancipatory effect.

But between the extremes of the "aesthetic regime of art" and the imperative of activism that uses art to trigger social change, there is art which tries to think aesthetics and sociability together, in a productive contradiction of trust in artistic autonomy and belief in art tied in to the possibility of social change. The works of Andreja Kulunčić offer a chance for society to reflect collectively on the imaginary figures it depends upon for its self-understanding, in a way which does not concede to the ruling regime of manipulating desire and maintaining political anesthesia. Art is understood as research, by which research results are no longer primary, but are rather one of the integral components, the background on which artistic production unfolds. The interdisciplinarity in which specific artistic skills are complemented by complementary skills from other areas is an important element of Andreja Kulunčić's artistic practice, whose works are almost regularly created in collaboration with sociologists, philosophers, scientists, designers, or marketing experts. Since her work *Nama: 1908 employees, 15 department stores* (2000) displayed as city-light posters, the artist has often used the tactic of appropriating advertising methods and inserting her works into the regular media flow, and especially her Internet-based works (*Closed Reality - Embryo*, 1999-2000, <http://embryo.inet.hr>, *Distributive Justice*, 2001-2005, <http://www.distributive-justice.com>) which operate both inside and outside of the art world, utilizing gallery space and the institutional framework of art as one of the possible areas of activity.

The works being presented at the exhibition *A Place Under the Sun* were made in relation to the demands of specific exhibitions, but their site-specificity is not taken literally, as an individual perceptual experience of a certain place, but as the discursive vector of a political, social or theoretical problem, thus creating relations between different locations. In that sense, the problematic issues featured in the works - migration (*Austrians Only*, 2005, *Sight Seeing*, 2003), teenage pregnancy (*Teenage Pregnancy*, 2004), hierarchical social division of public spaces (*A place under the sun*, 2004), criteria and models of "success" in the art market (*New York art scene for dummies*, 2005, *Artist from...*, 2002), transition (*Homewards*, 2003, *City Walks*, 2004) - are not spatially and contextually isolated phenomena, but unfold against the common backdrop of the dominant model of globalization as the project of neo-liberal capitalism, for which we all share responsibility. For example, in the work *Austrians only*, made for the Festival of Regions in Upper Austria (2005), the artist produces ads for degraded and badly paid jobs, which in Austria (and other countries of developed capitalism) are mostly carried out by immigrants, and publishes them in local newspapers, as street posters and direct-mail leaflets. The text's tone promises career possibilities and money for jobs that can never be achieved, but in that sense it does not differ much from regular marketing language. But the fact that jobs are offered only to Austrians subverts a viewer's sense of "inclusion" and causes identity anxiety by unveiling the unspoken rules of ethnical and class exclusion (and inclusion). The artist does not offer solutions or services, but discreetly enables enhanced sensibility, not presenting divisions in harmonious reconciliation or as absolute opposites, but in the tension that implicates their instability and openness to change. Andreja Kulunčić's position is not one of a detached observer, but one that simultaneously questions its own condition of production and reception, especially in light of the prevailing clichés of the "eastern European" artist temporarily working in the West. The fact that a large number of Austrian immigrants who are performing the worst paid jobs come from post-socialist countries, of which many are war refugees from ex-Yugoslavia, sets off a critical reflection on the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion operative in the mutual dynamics of the West and others, the European Union and its margins, of "us" and "them". Instead of a politically correct and functional educational suggestion of non-conflicting transition towards the liberal ideal of equalizing multicultural sociability, the real effect of the work is a twisted manifestation of that which is being suppressed in the name of normalizing consensus and

indisputable consent. By operating in the marginal areas of opposition and focusing her critique on the central values of imaginary institutions of globalizing societies and divisions conditioned by them, the artistic production of Andreja Kulunčić suggests the capability of art to offer polemical grounds for the rethinking and dissolution of certain institutional forms and the creation of new ones.

1. "Relational aesthetic" is the title of the collection of essays by Nicolas Bourriaud from 1998, in which he describes the art practice of the 1990s.
2. Claire Bishop, The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents, Art Forum International, February 2005.
3. Brian Holmes claims: "When people talk about politics in an artistic frame, they're lying." (in Brian Holmes, Liar's Poker, Representation of Politics / Politics of Representation, 2004, <http://www.16beavergroup.org/mtarchive/archives/000943.php>), and Stephen Wright writes that "art, in short, is the chief obstacle to artistic collaboration", and that it is "far more interesting when artists do not do art (...) when they inject their artistic aptitudes and perceptual habitus into the general symbolic economy of the real" (in Stephen Wright, The Delicate Essence of Artistic Collaboration, Third Text, Volume 18, Issue 6, November 2004. p. 535).