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The Red Dawns Festival as a Feminist-Queer Counterpublic

Abstract: The article discusses the feminist political theory of the internal and external functions of counterpublics, juxtaposing theoretic insights with an analysis of seventeen interviews carried out with the co-organisers of the International Feminist and Queer Red Dawns Festival (*Rdeče zore* in Slovene). The theme is framed in the recent history of feminist, lesbian and queer organising in Ljubljana, as well as the contemporary current of transnational DIY grassroots feminism. Geopolitically, the discussion is set in the postsocialist frame.

Key words: counterpublic, feminism, queer theory, Red Dawns, postsocialism

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Festival Rdeče zore kot feministično-kvirovska kontrajavnost

Izvleček: Prispevek obravnava feministično politično teorijo o notranji in zunanji funkciji kontrajavnosti. Teorijo sooči z analizo sedemnajstih intervjujev z organizatorkami Mednarodnega feminističnega in kvirovskega festivala Rdeče zore. Temo postavi v kontekst nedavne zgodovine feminističnega, lezbičnega in kvirovskega organiziranja v Ljubljani, v sodobni kontekst nadnacionalnega in neodvisnega naredi-sama feminizma in v geopolitični kontekst postsocializma.

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Ključne besede: kontrajavnost, feminizem, queer teorija, Rdeče zore, postsocializem



Introduction

In the geopolitical region of former Yugoslavia, several women's, feminist and queer festivals have been organized in the last decade. Most of them were non-professional, based on the Principle of "do it yourself" (DIY), and similar to Ladyfests which have taken place predominately in Western European and North American cities since 2000. While volunteer-run, horizontally organized and non-profit festivals such as Queer Belgrade (Serbia), PitchWise (Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina), Vox Feminae (Zagreb, Croatia) and Red Dawns (Ljubljana, Slovenia) managed to survive throughout the years, the majority of other non-professional festivals ceased to exist after their first edition. Some of them took place two or three times (Girlz are Weird in Kutina, Croatia) while others, like FemFest (Skopje, Macedonia), Girl Power Fest (Koprivnica, Croatia), and Zagreb-based festivals AnarchoFemFest and FemFest took place only once. In addition, there are three professionally organized festivals in the region which present contemporary art made by women (City of Women, Ljubljana), queers (Queer Zagreb) or lesbians, gays and other sexual minorities (Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, Ljubljana).

All of these festivals differ in terms of their political views, artistic visions, program items and target audiences. In spite of those differences, the majority of the then active festivals were very supportive of Red Dawns' 2006 call for cooperation between "women's,

feminist and queer festivals in the Balkans”² In March 2007, organizers of eight DIY and professional festivals came to Ljubljana where they finally met each other in person, shared their experience, and discussed each other’s organizing strategies as well as the obstacles they face in their work. The participants stipulated that they did not wish to unite and unify their agendas, but instead wanted to make communication and collaboration between themselves easier and more effective. Whilst the meeting did result in collaborations, program exchanges, staff sharing, and some joint funding applications, the network also brought to light another important difference between the festivals, which proved to be difficult to bridge despite the organizers’ desire to do so: that of professionalization. DIY and professional festivals have different conditions as well as methods of work, and one should be careful when comparing the two. In my essay, I chose not to compare these different branches of festivals, but instead framed my research within the space occupied by DIY festivals only. In fact, due to several limitations, I decided to focus on the DIY festival with the longest tradition in the region, the festival I know best because I have been co-organizing it since 2002: International Feminist and Queer Festival Red Dawns, based in the Autonomous Cultural Centre Metelkova mesto in Ljubljana, Slovenia. However, I did stipulate the international dimension of the festival by paying attention to its co-operation with Ladyfests from Western Europe and the women’s, feminist and queer festivals of the last decade that took place in the region of the former Yugoslavia.

The latter (spatial and temporal) frame of reference remains relevant for several reasons. Firstly, these festivals exist in a geopolitical space whose political and cultural imagined community had been almost completely destroyed fifteen years ago. Secondly, there

² Red Dawns, 2007a.

have been very deliberate efforts made by the festivals to learn more about forgotten local women's and feminist histories – cultural, political, social, intellectual, artistic – in an attempt to see the possibility of drawing a women's, feminist or even queer transgenerational genealogy. Thirdly, due to the impact of “nation-state-building” discourses that encouraged historical amnesia and supported negative media representations of feminisms after 1991, contemporary DIY festivals from the region define their politics primarily in relation (and opposition) to contemporary local academic and “NGO-ized” feminisms, rather than their local activist (and often forgotten) precedents. It would be highly interesting to study the similarities and differences between the festivals from the region to see which feminist and queer agendas are advocated as forms of “new”, “third wave” or simply “their own”, contemporary feminism. Even though I was forced to narrow my focus to Red Dawns festival only, I do hope that some of the originally planned comparative aspects, essential for a more distant, but no less subjective insight into “what it is we're doing”, remains visible to the extent that the reader can draw some of her or his own conclusions about this transnational yet geopolitically-bounded feminist-queer scene.

Situating Myself, Defining the Theme

My research theme was inspired by Gayatri Spivak's claim that every resistance is bound to fail if there is no infrastructure, no community in which the act can be understood as such.³ It was also inspired by Orchid, a hardcore band from the U. S., whose members self-ironically proclaimed “When we move, it's a movement!”⁴ and

³ Spivak, 1988.

⁴ Orchid, 1999. The slogan was quoted in the introductory text to the sixth Red Dawns festival in 2005 and taken from Orchid's song *Snow Delay at the Frankfurt School*. The whole lyric (supposedly) quotes a Situationist

disbanded soon afterwards. I wondered whether the organizers of Red Dawns festival managed to create a new public space or did they believe that the impact of their work was too limited, even self-referential, to the extent that the festival can be viewed as a literally “imagined community”?⁵ To what extent did their work touch, cross paths with, and conflict with other publics as well as the mainstream media and the “official public sphere”⁶ it frames? How did the organizers deal with the fact that any feminist-queer initiative is inevitably embedded in a patriarchal and heteronormative context? And what did it mean to have the privilege of organizing a festival in a “liberated”, “temporarily occupied” or “alternative” social space like ACC Metelkova mesto?

Could Red Dawns, other DIY women’s, feminist and queer festivals from the region, as well as their European and North American allies be seen as “oppositional imagined communities”?⁷ In Chandra T. Mohanty’s reinterpretation of Benedict Anderson’s concept, the proliferation of such communities coincides with the expansion of the so-called anti-globalist protests and the popularization of queer theory. In her view, these communities were originally limited to a certain town or country, and then started to connect to other independent cultural and activist groups on both national and transnational level. Red Dawns festival can indeed be seen as an imagined local community, which has been trying to create a feminist-queer space “from below” and thus create the conditions in which opposi-

poster or graffiti seen in the streets of Paris in May 1968: “Like anywhere else, there are no coincidences, probability makes for accomplices and change creates meaning.’ When we move, it’s a movement!” Orchid replaced the last sentence (“That’s when happiness and misery take shape.”) with a self-ironic conclusion.

⁵ Anderson, 1995.

⁶ Habermas, 1991.

⁷ Mohanty, 2002.

tion is possible. Yet, I wanted to test Mohanty's theory against the lived experience of Red Dawns (co)organizers and volunteers.

I have been co-organizing Red Dawns since 2002. Because I am so immersed in the subject of my study, I decided to situate myself in accordance with the principles of the feminist standpoint theory. Initially, I wanted to write from several points of view, including that of the relatively detached theorist. The latter promised to provide me with a means of *disidentification*, with the epistemic privilege of the "outsider within".⁸ My idea was based on the premise that grammatical distinctions could help me separate the different subjectivities at play. At the same time, I felt this approach might falsely suggest that the voices in use – 'she' the theorist, 'we' the organizing collective, and 'I' the participant or witness – can "solve" the paradoxes arising from the juxtaposition of these different yet intertwined subjectivities. I eventually decided to use first person singular throughout my essay although I did let myself slip into first person plural when the sense of belonging to Red Dawns seemed to validate, rather than disavow my claims. I thought my paradoxical position should be visible and dealt with in constructive ways. Feminist historian Luisa Passerini, for example, managed to do so in her studies by observing "the multiplicity of positions" or "the pluralisation of one's own image" as "a metaphor for non-singular subjectivity".⁹ This view allowed her to be self-reflective, self-ironic, conflicting and paradoxical: it was also a way to avoid essentialist views on experience as *the* authentic and reliable source.

For my research, I interviewed seventeen women who have co-organized the tenth Red Dawns festival in 2009. The interviews were oral and qualitative; they were conducted in either Slovene or English and consisted of thirteen basic questions that were modi-

⁸ Harding, 1991; Haraway, 1997.

⁹ Passerini, 2008, 266.

fied according to each interviewee's interests and level of involvement with the festival. Since my target group of interviewees consisted only of festival organizers and volunteers, it may seem like I have excluded festival audiences from the conceptualization of Red Dawns as a public. However, my narrowed focus is justified by the specificity of grassroots events such as Red Dawns. In contrast to professionally organized festivals, DIY festivals stipulate participation and, in addition, often cannot afford to distinguish between these roles even if they wanted to due to their financial limitations. In effect, the same people often play several different roles simultaneously – including the role of the audience. The second reason for my narrowed focus is that festivals such as Red Dawns came into being exactly because the women who organize them today acted on their own need for local feminist spaces. In other words, they did it for themselves first and, in the course of years, the new public sphere was able to develop primarily because of that motivation.

I was interested in addressing two aspects of the festival. The “internal” view addressed the organizers’ experience of the festival as a temporary and public feminist-queer space where art, theory, politics and life in general can be discussed in a stimulating, emotionally and intellectually affirmative environment. The second, “external” view, addressed those aspects that made the festival intellectually, artistically and politically visible to people who were not part of the “scene”. I wondered what – if anything – made the festival’s policy and events visible to the “general public”. I asked my interviewees how they (or rather we, since the answers were often built up from our joint effort to articulate what we have been doing together for the last eleven years) understand the idea of a feminist-queer public space, whether or not the festival fits that idea, and how the festival intertwines with other initiatives within what is locally known as the “alternative scene” in Ljubljana. Moreover,

how does Red Dawns fit in with the “jigsaw puzzle of today’s multifaceted, transnational DIY grassroots feminism”¹⁰ which is often, especially in the Western Europe and in the U.S., perceived as a specific current within today’s “third wave feminism”?¹¹

I rethought my theme through Rita Felski’s and Nancy Fraser’s theorizations of feminist counterpublics. In Felski’s theory, the “internal function” is defined as “generating a gender-specific identity grounded in a consciousness of community and solidarity among women”.¹² In Fraser’s terms, women-only and feminist counterpublics function as “spaces of withdrawal or regroupment”.¹³ Felski claimed that their second and equally important function is in “seeking to convince society as a whole of the validity of feminist claims, challenging existing structures of authority through political activity and theoretical critique”.¹⁴ Nancy Fraser spoke of counterpublics as “bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed towards wider publics” and added that it is “precisely in the dialectic between these two functions that their emancipatory potential resides”.¹⁵ I was especially intrigued by Nancy Fraser’s recognition of both dimensions’ importance and their dialectic relationship since it legitimised my own presupposition that the “internal” and “external” function of the festival can be juxtaposed and discussed relationally. In relation to a specific identity developed in spaces of withdrawal or regroupment, I examined the following questions: Did the festival’s declared politics of space (re)claiming succeed – or perhaps fail – in creating a safe space where the audience and partici-

¹⁰ Halberstam, 2005, 170.

¹¹ Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004; Chidgey, Reitsamer & Zobl, 2009.

¹² Felski, 1989, 168.

¹³ Fraser, 1990, 68.

¹⁴ Felski, 1989, 168.

¹⁵ Fraser, 1990, 68.

pants could discuss feminist and queer ideas, and put them to practice through cultural forms of activism? Was that space supportive of their political preferences and their (feminist, queer, lesbian, or/and other) identities? Did the organizers develop a sense of solidarity and community in the process? In relation to wider publics, I wondered, which tactics were used by the festival to gain media attention and legitimate their claims. Which issues and tactics were eventually most visible in the official public sphere? And last but not least: Is there a sense of continuity or discontinuity with feminists who were active in the past? After all, Red Dawns festival takes place annually around March 8th, and thus celebrates and reinterprets the significance of International Women's Day.

Due to my theoretical framework, my research provides a new insight into the recent history of feminist, lesbian, queer and women's counterpublics in Ljubljana. In the past, the debates have too often revolved around the immediate effects of feminist interventions in the official public sphere. Those accounts have obscured the internal function of feminist-queer counterpublics and, so I believe, self-consciously fell into an ideological trap of measuring their own political visibility with "masculinist" measures. The latter define relevant forms of political/public participation in ways that have historically excluded (and continue to exclude) the so-called "private" and "women's" as well as "lesbian" and "queer" issues from the public sphere. Thus, my essay argues for the necessity of expanding the notions of political and public beyond those prevalent in the mainstream media and the official public sphere in Slovenia. My work is therefore a critique of hegemonic discourse and a contribution to the diversification of (counter)public feminist-queer discourses. As mentioned, I was interested in the experience of Red Dawns, that is, in what sort of opinions were formed, changed or abandoned by women who actively participated

in the process of organizing the festival. However, I was also interested to know how our experience corresponded with or perhaps challenged the existing body of knowledge on feminist and queer counterpublics. For that purpose, I began my research by studying feminist political theory on public space.

Theories of Feminist-Queer Counterpublics

In 1990, Nancy Fraser argued for the necessity of theorizing non-liberal, non-bourgeois and competing public spheres that were excluded from Jürgen Habermas's highly influential study *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962). Her argument rested on the growing body of feminist and postcolonial revisionist historiographies which, among other things, demonstrated that the members of subordinated social groups "repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics".¹⁶ Fraser's main point was that "subaltern counterpublics" contested the exclusionary norms of the bourgeois public sphere by elaborating alternative styles of political behaviour and alternative norms of public speech. In these parallel discursive sites, subordinated people could "invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permitted them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs".¹⁷ Consequently they could enter official public spheres on their own terms by representing themselves.

Fraser coined the expression "subaltern counterpublics" by combining and reinterpreting two terms used by other theorists for similar purposes; "subaltern" was taken from Gayatri Spivak's well known essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988) and was, as I intend to show below, misinterpreted. "Counterpublics" was adopted from Rita Felski's study *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* (1989). For Felski, the

¹⁶ Fraser, 1990, 67.

¹⁷ Fraser, 1990, *ibidem*.

concept of a feminist counterpublic provided a model for the analysis of diverse forms of artistic and cultural activity by women in relation to the historical emergence of an influential oppositional ideology (in the late 1960s and 1970s), which sought to challenge the existing reality of gender subordination. This model enabled the situating of debate over artistic forms in relation to the conflicting needs of different sections of the women's movement rather than "simply assigning abstract political value to particular techniques".¹⁸ Both authors emphasized that it is important to recognize a variety of tactics and spaces in which subordinated groups of people can articulate their needs and interests as political and public. In Fraser's view, these proliferations lead towards greater democracy by lessening the chance of informal exclusion.

Questioning the legitimacy and efficacy of Habermas's theorization, both authors tried to conceptualize an alternative that would allow them to study the status and effects of the women's movement "as a force for change in the public realm".¹⁹ Felski claimed that feminist as well as other oppositional forces within the society of late capitalism no longer appeal to an ideal of universality but are directed towards an affirmation of specificity in relation to gender, race, ethnicity, age, sexual preference and other axes of difference. Because of her focus on politics of recognition, Felski stipulated the multiple and heterogeneous nature of counterpublics, but also claimed that they are united by a common concern for "new forms of social and political relations in which (...) mutuality, discussion, and concern with concrete needs predominate".²⁰ By implicitly expressing her belief that counterpublics cannot form a single revolutionary movement, she criticized the leftist revolu-

¹⁸ Felski, 1989, 164.

¹⁹ Felski, 1989, *ibidem*.

²⁰ Felski, 1989, 166.

tionary rhetoric of the late 1960s, which, like the bourgeois public sphere, tended to suppress internal differences within the movement for the sake of its external efficiency.

On the other hand, when focusing on the equally heterogeneous feminist movement, Felski insisted that a common identity of all women, based on a shared experience of gender-based oppression, was not only necessary but demanded that “distinctions of class may be temporarily suspended, though not ignored within this new domain”.²¹ Supposedly, this was possible because shared experiences worked to “equalize” all participants within it. It is worth noting that for Felski, feminist counterpublics consisted of *women*, who *experienced* oppression, rather than *feminists* who *politicised* that experience through their fight against cultural values, political orders and economic systems that perpetuate oppression. She insisted that some form of appeal to collective identity and solidarity was a necessary precondition for the emergence and effectiveness of an oppositional movement since

feminist theorists who reject any notion of a unifying identity as a repressive fiction in favor of a stress on absolute difference fail to show how such diversity and fragmentation can be reconciled with goal-oriented political struggles based upon common interests.²²

Rita Felski was well aware that all feminist counterpublics inevitably have to deal with the conflicting need to affirm and at the same time criticize the idea of a unified (not necessarily essentialist) women’s collective identity. Yet, because of her reliance on politics of recognition, she failed to notice that a “unifying identity” on one hand and “absolute difference” on the other do not need to be the only available positions within feminist counterpublics.

²¹ Felski, 1989, *ibidem*.

²² Felski, 1989, 168-9.

In my essay, I largely rely on Nancy Fraser's theory since it is preoccupied with the possibility of self-representation in conditions of social inequality as viewed from both the "internal" and "external" perspective. In her opinion, the expression of conflicting views within (as well as between) political groups, which strive for political recognition, is an advantage rather than a disadvantage since the concept of a public sphere presupposes a plurality of perspectives among those who participate in it. I agree that it is less likely for the most often expressed opinion to appropriate or silence all other voices if an opposition challenges the former. I also agree that conflicts help to sustain egalitarian relations within the group and strengthen its internal function. However, I am ambivalent as to whether internal disagreements can increase the groups' external efficiency since a group can become so troubled by its inner conflicts that eventually all energy is spent on that. Often, what follows is either disintegration or further fragmentation.

Knowing how vulnerable grassroots groups can be, I argue that some form of appeal to collective identity has to prevail if a group wants to communicate with other counterpublics. In addition, there is always a disparity between a counterpublics' inner and external status; between its self-understanding as a representative forum for feminists that is usually conflictual, and the picture the group wants to give to the public. In its external function, it will have to claim unity and consensus in order to be "taken seriously" – to be able to communicate with other (counter)publics. For Fraser, this communication is vital as she claims that the public orientation of oppositional spheres allows people's participation in more than one sphere, which makes both "intercultural and interpublic discussions possible".²³ Since the concept of counterpublics assumes an orientation towards wider publics it – in the long run – also works against

²³ Fraser, 1990, 70.

separatism: no matter how limited they are in their numbers or outreach, members of counterpublics see themselves as part of a potentially wider public. That is why counterpublics, as seen by Fraser, are not separatist enclaves by definition even if they might be “involuntarily enclaved”.²⁴

In order to challenge those theories that claim democracy can function in conditions of social inequality, Fraser initially spoke of “subaltern counterpublics”. Gayatri Spivak’s terminology was seen as appropriate for discussing the conditions in which self-representation of subordinated groups was still possible. However, I do not think that Fraser’s use of the term was in accordance with Spivak’s. I suspect this is also the reason why Nancy Fraser’s newer essays no longer employ that category but speak of counterpublics only. While she claimed that subaltern counterpublics can represent themselves even if they are often “silenced, encouraged to keep their wants inchoate, and heard to say ‘yes’ when what they have said is ‘no’”,²⁵ Spivak’s view was more pessimistic. She did not claim that subalterns could ever speak on their own terms. In fact, when Spivak wrote of subaltern subjects, she did not refer to individuals, organized in groups, but to subjects who have no community, and therefore cannot speak since there is nobody to listen and nobody to recognize their acts of resistance as such. Spivak did speculate about the possibility of self-representation in a hypothetical situation in which a subaltern woman no longer needed to speak the standardized “text of female exploitation” and the manipulation of her agency by either other subalterns or feminists from hegemonic culture was no longer an option. However, in order to make that possible, the understanding of what counts as resistance would have to be radically changed and expanded. Spi-

²⁴ Fraser, 1990, 67.

²⁵ Fraser, 1990, 64.

vak's essay did not claim that this was possible in the present economic and political order.

Similarly, public participation is not merely about being able to state propositions that are "neutral" or understandable to all other (counter)publics. For Fraser, "participation means being able to speak 'in one's own voice', thereby simultaneously constructing and expressing one's cultural identity through idiom and style".²⁶ Since no public sphere is neutral or universal, in the sense that it can accommodate any kind of expression, it favours dominant, generally recognizable forms of expression. Fraser believed that counterpublics have the power to articulate an issue in their own way – or in dialogue with other counterpublics – and insist on it until it is recognized as an issue of general concern. She mentioned the example of "domestic violence" or "date rape" as terms that have entered the list of general concerns and legislature because of feminist efforts that originally started in weak counterpublics that possessed only opinion-making power. This example confirms that Fraser was indeed speaking of organized feminist and women's publics in the West, and not about women who would fit Spivak's definition of subalterns as "subjects of exploitation" who "cannot know and speak the text of female exploitation even if the absurdity of the non-representing intellectual making space for her [them] to speak is achieved".²⁷

Since my essay is preoccupied with feminist-queer organizing in Ljubljana where counterpublic organizing is possible and indeed taking place, I have refrained from using the term "subaltern" as well. I have relied more on Fraser's and Felski's idea about the necessity of proliferating forms of political expression in ways that can accommodate a plurality of subordinated groups. Specifically,

²⁶ Fraser, 1990, 69.

²⁷ Spivak, 1988, 84.

my case study of Red Dawns focuses on the tactical significance of the festival's cultural activism because the institutionalised understanding of political participation and public matters of general concern in Slovenia continues to exclude feminist, queer and lesbian issues as personal, private and apolitical. I am not interested in seeking abstract political value in specific tactical approaches but in theorizing about Red Dawns as a counterpublic space with both an internal and external function on the basis of its founders', organizers' and volunteers' experience and perception of the festival. In order to do that, I contextualize Red Dawns within the space, occupied by women's, feminist, lesbian and queer groups that have been active in Ljubljana for the last ten years. My genealogic revision of autonomous initiatives tries to discuss their internal function in relation to (the extent and limits of) their mobilizing power, that is, the ways in which they try to enter official public sphere and claim counterpublic spaces of their own.

(In)visibility of Feminist-Queer Counterpublics in Ljubljana

In her 2007 review of local non-institutional feminist history, journalist Tanja Lesničar Pučko noted that the 1980s movement was "characterized by a critical - and humorous - attitude towards the hegemonic discourse of Yugoslavian politics and aesthetics".²⁸ She also claimed that women's and feminist autonomous groups from the 1980s "established a kind of network that, to a certain extent, in this way or that, still exists and (perhaps?) still carries a latent mobilizing power, an informal potential for solidarity".²⁹ In 2002, political theorist Vlasta Jalušič claimed that "certain feminist ideas and lifestyles have become part of our everyday life" yet "today feminist groups in Slovenia can

²⁸ Lesničar Pučko, 2007, 82.

²⁹ Lesničar Pučko, 2007, 83.

be counted on the fingers of one hand”.³⁰ Four years later, journalist Valentina Plahuta Simčič in her article about contemporary “Slovene feminism” wondered whether “there are any feminists left at all”.³¹ She interviewed two of the most prominent feminist intellectuals in Slovenia, anthropologist Svetlana Slapšak and philosopher Eva D. Bahovec – and me.³² Both academics refused the presupposition about the seeming absence of feminist thought in contemporary official public sphere by claiming, similarly to Vlasta Jalušič, that feminist views have “spread throughout the social body”.³³ To support their claims, Eva D. Bahovec listed an array of associations and institutions that have incorporated feminist ideas into their work.

Feminists are present at universities, institutions; there is very lively publishing activity, with many small presses releasing feminist works (*cf, Sophia, ŠKUC’s Vizibilija, Lambda and Aleph editions, Krtina, Analecta, Studia Humanitatis...); there is *Delta* magazine; Radio Študent is doing an excellent job when it comes to feminist issues; an active part of feminist scene consists of women’s groups (SOS phones, Ključ Association); the number of cultural and artistic projects with women’s or feminist themes (festivals like City of Women and Red Dawns) is growing”.³⁴

³⁰ Jalušič, 2002, 89.

³¹ Plahuta Simčič, 2006, 15.

³² While I was invited to speak on behalf of Red Dawns festival, the context – a full page article about *Slovene* feminism published in one of the most widely read dailies (*Delo*) – positioned me as a representative voice of the “new” or “young” generation of local feminists. The article was accompanied by a photograph of several female Slovene Army soldiers jumping out of the back of a truck. By reducing our transnational feminist claims to a national context, the journalist (and/or the photo editor) depoliticised our statements and appropriated their disruptive potential for nation-state-building and militant goals.

³³ Plahuta Simčič, 2006, 15.

³⁴ Plahuta Simčič, 2006, *ibidem*.

Focusing primarily on groups formed in the 1980s and institutionalised in mid-1990s, her account did not include the full spectrum of feminist activities in Ljubljana. She did not mention (and might not be aware of) those grassroots activities that evade her implicit criteria, largely because they are politically marginalized and organized by a younger generation of activists, artists and students who, in turn, might not be aware of their local feminist predecessors and institutionalised contemporaries or are not in accord with their political strategies.

As I have demonstrated below, grassroots, autonomous or DIY groups today do exist. In fact, when the reproductive rights of women were threatened again in 2006, it became quite clear that it would be necessary to fight in more visible ways. However, the question persists: Is feminists' ability to mobilize people today really restrained to politically similar counterpublics that exist within what is jokingly known as the "liberated territory" or "alternative scene" in Ljubljana? In 2006, when feminist scholars urged that "the situation is ripe for feminist activism",³⁵ a graffiti from 1991 reappeared with renewed urgency. "Women against nation – for abortion rights!" it called, signed by the feminist symbol and a clenched fist. Another graffiti ironically remarked that in 2006, "A foetus has more rights than a woman". These actions and the less successful protests against the discrimination of lesbians, single women and women with disabilities in 2000, were the two occasions when the (limits of the) mobilizing potential of feminist initiatives in Slovenia was most visible. The protests also shed some light on the existing transgenerational feminist connections.

In a country where lesbians and gays can "register" their partnership but do not have access to the legal rights provided by the

³⁵ Plahuta Simčič, 2006, *ibidem*.

institution of marriage,³⁶ reproductive rights are granted to heterosexual women only. Already in 2000 when the newly elected conservative government attempted to implement a legislation that would make artificial insemination available only to heterosexual couples who were married or cohabiting, this serious violation of women's reproductive choices faced severe opposition from a wide array of feminist, lesbian, women's and other progressive groups. Later that year, liberally oriented political parties tried to introduce an amendment that would make medically assisted artificial insemination formally accessible to single women, lesbians and women with disabilities. However, the right-wing parliamentary parties used the opportunity of installing a public referendum about the issue. The right of single women to get artificially inseminated was put under the final decision of the voting majority in the summer of 2001 – and was rejected. To this day, artificial insemination remains inaccessible to lesbians, single women and women with disabilities in Slovenia.

Four years later, on March 8th 2005, an anonymous letter entitled “Do you remember March 8th?” claimed that the 2005 governmental proposal for positive demographic growth used hate speech and discriminatory measures. The letter criticized the Minister of Labour, Family and Social Affairs Janez Drobnič who

sent women back to the kitchen by suggesting that the recently fired female textile workers ‘who are skilled cooks and domestic labourers’ could use their skills on the labour market as well. (...)

³⁶ Hopefully, that is about to change. In July 2009, the court held that the first Registration of Same Sex Partnerships Act proposed in November 2006 was based on unequal and discriminatory standards between same sex and opposite sex couples and therefore unconstitutional. On March 2nd 2010, after intense public debates, legal complaints and protests, the revised and indiscriminatory version of the act successfully passed the first parliamentary reading and voting. However, the second reading, which began on June 30th 2010 and continued on September 1st 2010, is still going on.

Member of Parliament, Pavel Rupar, suggested that the state should lessen its financial support for safe houses because they undermine the idea of the family as a traditionally safe environment. (...) All these statements are violent and put pressure on all residents of Slovenia.

The public letter was handed out by a small activist group that staged a burlesque portrayal of patriarchal family roles in Park Zvezda and ridiculed the minister personally by calling itself the Janez Drobnič Folklore Group. On November 15th 2006, the same minister proposed a “fertility raising strategy” which, among many other discriminatory suggestions, limited access to abortion. The strategy proposed a 400 € fee for (previously free) abortion procedures, thus ensuring that abortion would become inaccessible for a large number of poor and young women. The strategy was, like the successfully opposed proposition from 1991, trying to instrumentalize women for its own “nation-building” goals. Furthermore, the new legislation used catholic discourse by equating the beginning of life with conception. Streetwise feminists responded with graffiti: “A foetus has more rights than a woman”, “Let’s abort Drobnič!”, “I’d rather be a test-tube baby than Drobnič’s child”, and a slogan which connected the discriminatory proposal about artificial insemination from 2000 with the same type of demographic policy by sarcastically offering the perfect solution: “To raise fertility – inseminate single women and lesbians”.

Already on November 17th 2006, the ad hoc Feminist Initiative in Support of Abortion Rights entered ministry bureaus early in the morning and awaited the employees with a statement objecting the proposed strategy:

The state reduces women to irrational beings who are unable to decide for themselves (...) and whose primary function is repro-

duction. (...) We strongly oppose the proposed strategy and ask how is it possible that Slovene government is systematically violating and abolishing human rights. Who is going to be next?

The activists used posters and banners to surround the bureaus and publicly expose it as a violator of women's rights. The slogans ("Women = birth machines", "Defend abortion rights - tomorrow it is going to be too late", "Yesterday migrants and Erased citizens, today Roma people and women; who is next?") placed discriminatory policies against women in the context of institutionalised violence against many other marginalized groups of people. On November 30th, the initiative co-organized the first public discussion about the proposed strategy together with the Peace Institute and Red Dawns festival. Because of increasing public pressure,³⁷ the unconstitutional strategy was eventually abandoned and the responsible Minister was forced to resign.

The first feminist street actions of the new millennium in Ljubljana were inspired by the informal network of groups and individuals that began their political activities after world-wide protests against the World Trade Organisation meeting in Seattle in 1999. In response to biased reports in Slovene media that addressed the protesters as "criminals", a group of protesters walked the streets

³⁷ Public letters demanding Minister Drobnič's immediate leave were written by The Peace Institute, an impromptu protest group of women signed as 'Outraged', another group signed as 'Concerned Citizens', autonomous Feminist Initiative, association Vita Activa, Equal Opportunity Group of the Liberal Democratic Party, the Progressive Party, academic political group Liberal Academy, The Institute for Parenthood and Family, the Non-Governmental Organizations Alliance, the Women's forum and the Deputy Group of Social Democrats, and the thirty-two intellectuals who co-authored and signed the *Public Initiative for the Formation of a Comprehensive National Strategy* (Vita Activa, 2006).

of Ljubljana in November 1999 and carried banners claiming, “We are the criminals!” The movement gained further experience with smaller actions and performances (in Interspar, a group of women activists ‘advertised’ Heidersil; a new washing powder that cleans historic stains and contains ‘adolfils’), with solidarity and group actions (for example, on the International Day of Persons with Disabilities), with constant resistance to police harassment in ACC Metelkova mesto, by participating in Prague protests and with raising attention to state violence.³⁸

In order to coordinate the network, UZI (*Urad za intervencije* or Bureau of Interventions) was founded. The bureau was a fictional organization with fictional headquarters, leadership and members; it consisted of a series of meetings where individual activists and self-organized groups learnt how to communicate and organize in anti-authoritarian ways. Women and feminists who took part in these meetings politicised gender and sexuality in relation to many other issues, including violations of women’s sexual autonomy and reproductive choices, poverty and the discriminatory labour market, invisibility of marginalized and victimized people, privatisation of public spaces and right-wing reinterpretations of recent history. They expressed their politics through relatively explicit feminist terminology and mainly used street protest as their tactic.

On March 8th 2001, *Ženska sekcija Urada za intervencije* (Women’s Section of Bureau of Interventions), consisting of two small activist groups, temporarily squatted cosmetics and women’s clothing department stores in the centre of Ljubljana. They addressed the general commercialisation of life and the repressive nature of private spaces reserved exclusively for consumption. They danced among the bewildered customers and shop assistants, and

³⁸ Zadnikar, 2004, 15.

spread out somewhat confusing flyers (depicting a Barbie doll with a mobile phone) that read:

The International Women's Day might make you worry about exactly what it is that makes you a woman. Is it your man? Your child? (...) The contents of your shopping bag? Your high heels? (...) The way you hold your cigarette? All of this is important. (It really doesn't matter.) You are important.

When security staff threatened them with police intervention, the groups continued the action in front of the stores – on public grounds. One group read the manifesto *AlieNation: The Map of Despair* written by the U.S. collective CrimethInc., demanding the creation of public spaces where “we can let our bodies and minds run free” as opposed to

control that is exerted over us automatically by the spaces we live and move in. We go through certain rituals in our lives – work, ‘leisure’, consumption, submission –because the world we live in is designed for these alone. (...) All the spaces we travel in have pre-set meanings, and all it takes to keep us going through the same motions is to keep us moving along the same paths.³⁹

The second group read excerpts from Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. On the same day, Nada Hass (*nada* means “nothing” in Spanish and *hass* means “hatred” in German), an improvised all-women activist choir, performed at Klub Gromka in ACC Metelkova mesto. Dressed up as cleaners and housekeepers, they sang: “Let's set things straight with our past, let's wipe away the borders, let's make our relationships work and wipe away the violence!”⁴⁰ Nada Hass was also a fictional public relations personality invented in

³⁹ CrimethInc. Ex-workers' Collective, 2001.

⁴⁰ Ozmec, 2001, 14.

order to “avoid exposure of individual activists and avoid media production of ‘leaders’ (...) Nada Hass did many phone interviews but never appeared on television. Many were disturbed by Nada’s mixing of playfulness, irony and performance with political issues”.⁴¹

The oppositional knowledge listed in this metaphorical feminist-queer textbook is site-specific as it can only exist and renew itself on the streets. It cannot be transferred to another medium – the least of all into a textbook since graffiti and street actions are primarily physical and anonymous acts of resistance. Their reclaiming of public spaces has the potential of diverting attention from the violence of advertisement to unprofitable yet crucial issues. Street actions and graffiti also create the possibility of encounters in urban settings which have been, in absence of “sustainable planning”, deprived of public meeting places. Individual slogans and actions addressed specific issues, and activists sought the comfort of the night and anonymity exactly because they wanted to avoid confrontations with the law and possible confrontations with their political opponents. The undeniable and irreplaceable element of this type of street activism is the experience of physical vulnerability and exposure, which, paradoxically, gives strength to the activists. From a feminist perspective this type of exposure has additional meanings inscribed: through it, women do not only reclaim the streets but also their bodies, their knowledge and history. And they have no choice; they must be rebellious as long as they are oppressed. Or, to rephrase the point made: the actions and alliances described in this chapter, these counterpublics-in-progress, suggest that small feminist, lesbian, queer or women’s groups can come up with tactical and constructive critique. They suggest that one of the many places where we can start rethinking and practicing feminism in relation to struggles for social justice is *the street*.

⁴¹ Zadnikar, 2004, 16.

Discontinuity or Change?

The examples stated above demonstrate that feminist-queer ideas in Slovenia have indeed “spread throughout the social body”. Yet, it could be easily argued that when viewed only from the perspective of their external function feminist political initiatives are often ineffective due to their rare and provisional nature. Even though collaborations between academic, non-governmental and grassroots groups exist, they are very vulnerable because they form only in response to particular cases of discrimination or hatred and usually disband when the immediate threat is over or when specialized political groups take over the case. This defensive position is one of the reasons for feminists’ perceived political/public invisibility. However, as mentioned, the temporary and provisional nature of cooperative actions reflects other problems that are specific for feminists from postsocialist countries even though they partly coincide with problems of Western feminisms: the reluctance to identify and be recognized as feminists due to general antifeminism and the stigmatisation of feminism as a separatist and misandrist ideology; the reluctance to actively participate in collectively and voluntarily-run political, cultural and artistic non-profit projects due to the increasing value attributed to individualism and consumerism; and the general lack of solidarity, reflected also in feminist and women’s groups reluctance to seek potential allies in other counterpublics – and vice versa.

Of course, this reasoning is based on an implicit idea of how feminist organizing should be structured. Its insistence on collective organizing is reductive and hinders one’s ability to recognize individual forms of feminist-queer activism that without doubt exist. I argue that in the current political circumstance, collective and autonomous organizing makes tactical sense since it has the ability to open up new counterpublic spaces where femi-

nist issues can be discussed and strategies of action can be planned. Both Nancy Fraser's theorization of counterpublics and Mary Pratt's concept of a "contact zone"⁴² – as the site where feminists and queers can meet, interact, negotiate and cooperate – allows me to expand the notion of physical space to a discursive one; to the study of the many alliances and co-operations that can be formed between individuals and groups on a local, regional and international scale. I believe that as long as these public spaces cannot be taken for granted, the need for collective feminist action remains important. I also believe that the relative invisibility of feminist initiatives in Slovenia today is the reason why a feminist and lesbian "oppositional imagined community" with "the potential to build alliances and collaborations across divisive boundaries"⁴³ of identity in non-hierarchical ways and with the desire to resist persistent and systemic forms of domination is, at this stage, still very vulnerable and loose. In fact, the term "community" suggests the kind of permanence of activities and alliances that cannot be seen in Ljubljana. Nevertheless, the existing groups, initiatives and alliances are important agents of both continuity and change *within* the very fragmented feminist-queer map of Ljubljana.

Mohanty's political rather than essentialist definition of community recognizes the possibility of strategic and temporary cultural-political alliances that define women's, feminist and queer festivals both as physical and discursive points of convergence for people who wish to define their own forms of cultural-political participation and resistance. Writer and lesbian activist Suzana Tratnik, who collaborated with Red Dawns from 2000 to 2007 (as part of the lesbian club Monokel), claims that the festival's de-

⁴² Pratt, 1992.

⁴³ Mohanty, 1991, 196.

clared politics of space (re)claiming were, and remain, very “real” and important:

Because of Red Dawns, people started talking about feminism or, actually, feminisms again. For a long time, this was not the case, especially after Ženski center [Metelkova Women’s Center] died away. (...) Because the feminist scene from the 1980s partitioned and got specialized – some focused on violence against women, others on Women’s Studies, etc. – there were no events, no public spaces, no gatherings. And that was missing.

Yet, as other interviewees suggested, the successful creation of a counterpublic feminist-queer space is only the first step on the long way to achieve the kind of network intersections, horizontal solidarity and continuity necessary for establishing a feminist-queer counterpublic. At most, they would refer to the present state of affairs as a “local scene” limited to Ljubljana.

It seems that rather than seeking inspiration from local feminist groups of the 1980s or local feminist knowledge production of the 1990s and the last decade, the new generation of feminists tends to, among other sources, rely on do-it-yourself politics. DIY feminism is an umbrella term fusing many different types of feminism. Drawing on genealogies of punk cultures, grassroots movements, and the technologies of late capitalism, this movement meshes lifestyle politics with countercultural networking. It takes everyday acts of resistance as its focus. In her article about DIY feminist networks in Europe, Red Chidgey claims, “DIY feminism disrupts beliefs that feminism and social change are no longer on the agenda of young people”.⁴⁴ She refers to both Western and Eastern-European contexts and writes that the roots of contemporary DIY feminisms can be traced to the so-called post-feminist milieu, constituting a grass-

⁴⁴ Chidgey, 2009a.

roots, micro-political or counterpublic feminist response to consumer capitalism and state authority. “Drawing on the cultural currency of prefigurative politics – of living the change you want to see in the world”⁴⁵, or indeed on the legacy of Situationism, these ideas circulate through the “affective economies of passion, pleasure, friendships, and community-building”.⁴⁶ As Belgium zine-maker Nina Nijsten stated:

DIY feminism is about doing feminism by ourselves and making changes, however small they may seem at first sight. It means not waiting for others, for “professionals” or politicians, to make the world more women-friendly and to solve problems related to sexism.⁴⁷

In Chidgey’s view, DIY feminist actions take many forms, but commonly include producing activist media and films, squatting buildings to create counterpublic spaces, creating guerrilla or street art, holding discussion groups, facilitating workshops, moving politics into music and performance, skill-sharing, organizing street demos and protests, and exploring self-sufficiency. From my own perspective, DIY feminism allows for an even more profound proliferation of tactical approaches to re-envisioning and transforming society – one that most certainly seems ineffective and invisible when viewed exclusively from the point of view of feminist-queer counterpublics’ external function. However, by paying attention to their internal aspect, it becomes possible to speak about individual acts of resistance and the invisible day and night dreaming that expands the mental space as equally legitimate acts of resistance. All these tactics can be accommodated

⁴⁵ Chidgey, 2009a.

⁴⁶ Chidgey, 2009a.

⁴⁷ Chidgey & Zobl, 2009.

within DIY queer-feminism and its European network. As the organizers agreed, Red Dawns festival is definitely part of that transnational network. “On the international level, the network has already been weaved. The festival is great because it enabled a space, an entry point into that network”, said Daša Tepina and immediately noted the irony of the situation in which the festival is more connected internationally than locally. “On the local level, the problem remains”, she said:

We are unable to organize ourselves to the point where we could come up with a visible practice that would make sense so that we would not push ourselves back into the margins. (...) First, you need a strong base from where you can support people and projects. On the international level, the solidarity network is important. On the local level, you can of course expect solidarity from others but you cannot expect that somebody else is going to work instead of you locally. That’s the problem (...); first, you need something to root your connections in. I think it is of high importance to work on a local infrastructure, be it theory or action-orientated, in order to be able to react to different types of problems, to join certain initiatives, and generally become more visible in society.

The fact that the temporary nature of the festival is very much connected to the issue of discontinuity and the general absence of a feminist-queer counterpublic in Ljubljana, is going to be discussed in the final chapter. At this point, I want to stipulate Red Chidgey’s view that DIY feminist interventions in Europe are “often temporary or ephemeral”, where “creating autonomous zones such as festivals and gatherings are an integral part of DIY feminism”. In the same way, anti-capitalist tendencies are inherently bound up in these actions: “self/collective produced culture, politics, entertain-

ment, and work are held as ideals, and non-profit voluntary or activist labour is the movement's lifeblood".⁴⁸

In addition to DIY politics and ideals, feminist and queer counterpublics in Ljubljana have been influenced by the variety of ideas that can be found under the increasingly popular tag of "queer politics" and, as mentioned, the activist practices of creative resistance, revived by the "anti-globalisation" movements for social justice of the new millennium. And while these new feminist and queer initiatives have indeed politicised new issues and created new public spaces from below, it is worth noticing that feminists from the 1980s fought in the name of the same principles. Since the latter continue to be intellectually, artistically and politically active, the reasons for a very noticeable generational discontinuity and the general perception about feminism's invisibility today have to be sought elsewhere. In this respect, understanding "the postsocialist condition"⁴⁹ is of key importance.

I am going to focus on the postsocialist condition as experienced in Slovenia. First, I am going to analyse the rise of new conservatism in the form of ethnocentrism, right-wing historical revisionism and antifeminism. Second, I am going to discuss the institutionalisation of 1980s feminist groups, especially the introduction of Gender Studies and their effect on young feminists' perception of feminism as an academic discipline that has little or nothing to do with reality. The following chapter should demonstrate that I am not trying to judge present-day manifestations of feminism and queer politics from the perspective of past movements. My main interest is to analyse and understand the political, social and cultural changes that have characterized the postsocialist condition in Slovenia as well as contemporary and local feminist-queer responses to it.

⁴⁸ Chidgey, 2009a.

⁴⁹ Naples, 2004; Iveković, no date.

Neoconservatism and Ethnocentrism

Two decades ago, when the Berlin Wall “fell”, prophets of a new, global, postmodernist era were proclaiming the end of ideology and history. They were quite right, as intense neoconservative and neoliberal revisions of the past in “the West” and “East”⁵⁰ indeed swept away the memory of political alternatives and with it, the ability to imagine them. In the same way, the belief in the possibility of collective political resistance was largely replaced by individualism and moral apathy. “Post-communist transition”, or rather, “Western capitalism-restoration” were two faces of the same process and since “the Wall fell on both sides and not merely one”,⁵¹ neoliberalism indeed became the sole deterministic master narrative on both sides of the shifting border between East and West. It is therefore not surprising that today, despite their significantly different histories, left-wing intellectuals, activists and artists (including feminists) on “both fronts” are calling for politics of alliance and solidarity, and are looking for tactical ways to fight old ethnocentrisms, nationalisms, and racisms in their new, yet recognizable and highly gendered disguises.

As feminist theorists⁵² have argued, nationalist discourses frequently appropriate women as the symbolic bearers of national identity. While this appropriation can take (and has historically

⁵⁰ In the following chapter, I use categories “West” and “East” not in an explanatory but in a descriptive sense. I use them to denote the discursive and shifting border between “them” and “us” rather than to define a geopolitical space and border. Expressions such as “the Balkans” and “Slovenia” are similarly used to designate “the East” – unless their meaning is specified by the context. I do not use quotation marks in the text but nevertheless acknowledge the restraining difficulties that enter theory together with the discourse about “the East/West divide”.

⁵¹ Iveković, no date, 1.

⁵² Iveković, 1993; Braidotti & Griffin, 2002.

taken) many different forms, one example can be observed in both Western and Eastern European countries every time new “fertility-raising” policies are introduced as the single corrective mechanism for declining birth rates on the literally “old continent”. Various “baby-bonus” policies that have been recently introduced by governments of Germany, Russia, Italy, and Poland, to name just a few, have relied heavily on the simultaneous promotion of mothering as the most rewarding “career choice”. In this political climate even neoliberal feminists who measure women’s emancipation by their individual financial success can be seen as “progressive” even though their agenda is clearly based on the same moral and political grounds.

“Neoconservative liberal individualism” is “profoundly ethnocentric” and as such, “takes the form of contradictory and racist positions”⁵³ in which “our women” are seen as “emancipated (...), Western, Christian, mostly white and raised in the tradition of secular Enlightenment”, while “their women” are seen as “backwards” and belonging to that other world, “non-Western, non-Christian, mostly not white (...), alien to the Enlightenment tradition”.⁵⁴ Even though women from postsocialist countries, as seen through Western eyes, most often belong to the other side of the binary, their bodies in Eastern-European nationalist imaginary personify the (edge of that) same, Western and “civilized” territory. While this contradiction confirms that the East/West divide is shifting and is, as such, located in discourse rather than geopolitical space, it also shows how orientalist (or, in case of the Balkans, balkanist) discourse is mirrored in postsocialist countries of South-Eastern Europe. For example, through these countries’ strict migration policies and fertility-raising strategies which, because of their complete sep-

⁵³ Braidotti, 2005, 171.

⁵⁴ Braidotti, 2005, *ibidem*.

aration suggest that “our” women and “our” children indeed define the border between “us” and “them”. Ironically yet expectedly, in this case “they” are located on the Eastern and Southern border of South-Eastern Europe, not in the West.

The Non-Alignment Movement with its anti-colonialist and anti-racist policy on one hand and the state-socialist ideology of “brotherhood and unity” in former Yugoslavia on the other “managed to neutralize such traditional dichotomies as East/West and their nesting variants (Europe/Asia, Europe/Balkans, Christian/Muslim)”, however, “the same categories of difference turned into sharp oppositions as soon as the neutralizing framework was destroyed”.⁵⁵ Along with it, the war also destroyed multicultural communities of people that transcended these dichotomies. Local theoretical attempts to understand this drastic turn introduced “ethnicity” and “race” as descriptive categories which were previously a “no-go” area or considered unnecessary since racism in Yugoslavia was officially “defunct” – in the same way “the women’s question” was supposedly “solved”. This, in addition to the specific “colouring” of the whiteness debate in Western Europe that “obscured the intermittently flaring race relations in the European countries”⁵⁶, is the reason why in Slovenia, for example, nationalist discourse still claims that there cannot be any racism in the country since “black people don’t live here”. While the invisibility of black people is *per se* an indicator of racism, the argument becomes even more absurd and dangerous when one considers the hatred targeting the so-called non-Slovenes (Serbs, Croats, Bosnians, Montenegrins, Macedonians, and Albanians as a discursively homogeneous group or “object of projected otherness” that stands in opposition to ethnic Slovenes), Romani people, migrants from other capitalist periph-

⁵⁵ Bakić-Hayden, 1995, 931.

⁵⁶ Griffin & Braidotti, 2002, 225.

eries and people who are discriminated on the base of their religious and class affiliation, political persuasion, physical ability, and, “of course”, sexual orientation and gender identity.

I have deliberately diminished important differences that exist between both contexts even though I do not consent to “the populist conviction that the era of accelerated globalisation is not an appropriate time for stipulating distinctions between East and West”⁵⁷ – a conviction that Marina Gržinić locates primarily in post-socialist lands’ desire to “become European” by calling it “a symptom of an ideological blind spot”,⁵⁸ also known as “eurosis”. Cultural theorist Mitja Velikonja uses this term to describe new ethnocentrism that “delegitimise all alternatives to existing discourses and practices of Euro-Atlantic integration”.⁵⁹ When read in reverse, eurosis reveals that “European identity is based on ethnic, national and racial criteria, and as such, serves the legitimisation of various (violent) processes of inclusion and exclusion”.⁶⁰ I have stipulated similarities in order to suggest, as many before me have done, that the neoliberal context urges for a cross-border dialog and alliances between left-wing intellectuals, activists and artists from East and West. In this sense, the intense networking between women’s, feminist and queer festivals, collectives and associations from the region of former Yugoslavia is politically provocative *per se*.

Historical Revisionism

Post-transitional revisionist histories in Slovenia have diminished the role of antifascist struggles during WWII, erased almost five decades of Yugoslav socialism and with it, also the traces of

⁵⁷ Gržinić, 2005, 60.

⁵⁸ Gržinić, 2005, *ibidem*.

⁵⁹ Jeffs, 2007, 28.

⁶⁰ Jeffs, 2007, *ibidem*.

women's political participation and organizing in both periods. Paradoxically, these "new histories" encourage historical amnesia. They coincide with the rise of conservative morals, neoliberal market economy and right-wing politics. The latter have radically cut students', workers' and pensioners' rights and systematically discriminate against the poor, the elderly, migrants, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities and especially women belonging to those social groups.

Those who are disturbed by historical amnesia presuppose that historical consciousness is crucial for understanding (or illuminating) the present possibilities. However, knowing that histories written after 1991 often reinterpret past events in the light of historians' present political affiliations, feminist revisions should be wary. If they rely on sources that legitimate the present, "chosen"⁶¹ political order, they are in danger of advocating an ideological, rather than methodological location. While the latter understands that different locations and political views inevitably produce different interpretations of the past, and that "dialectical truth" is to be found in their conflicting intersections, the former equate history with dominant discourse in order to show that there are no imaginable alternatives to present-day *status quo*. In this discourse, "the present is a deaf echo of past cataclysms".⁶²

Anarchist organizers of protests against neo-fascism that took place on April 27th 2009 in Ljubljana managed to create a temporary and highly heterogeneous alliance of many (reportedly, around 800 people attended) exactly because they spoke about new fascism in the context of revisionist politics and governments that tolerate it. Tactically speaking, they could not have picked a better occasion.

⁶¹ Note how grammar can serve political interests. Supposedly, capitalist economy was "chosen" by citizens while the Berlin Wall "fell" all by itself.

⁶² Močnik, 2008, 52.

Until 1992, April 27th was a national holiday, commemorating the Liberation Front (the ideologically varied antifascist coalition during WWII), also known as the Day of Antifascist Struggle. In 1992, and despite protests, it was renamed to the Day of Struggle against the Occupier. Even though “the occupier” has not been defined, it was quite clear (especially because many street names related to the socialist past were being renamed at the same time) that the authorities had “overwritten” the antifascist victory with the 1991 declaration of Slovenian independence, and thus implicitly equated fascists with communists.

In 2006, a symbolic cultural action opposing falsifications of memory and history was organized by Red Dawns festival. On March 8th, the festival opened with a repertoire of revolutionary partisan songs sung by twenty-two members of the Women’s Choir of the Pensioner’s Association from Idrija. Earlier that year, the choir was banned from performing at an antifascist commemoration in Trieste (Italy) since the mayor thought that the advertisements for the event were too reminiscent of “communist propaganda”. Red Dawns’ event was a response to the mayor’s decision and an attempt at “maintaining the connection with Slovenian feminist tradition”.⁶³ The event was organized in ACC Metelkova mesto and succeeded in doing something hardly imaginable: despite Metelkova’s media-induced stigmatisation, it managed to bring together three generations of antifascists and feminists – from teenage anarchist punks and queers to the generation of their parents which participated in social movements of the 1980s and the generation of *their* parents which supported or fought within the WWII Liberation Front. The oldest people in the audience were two men who volunteered for the Popular Front in the Spanish Civil War. The emotional impact of this event was enormous as the

⁶³ Bašin, 2006, 15.

packed venue (around 300 people attended) literally embodied the historical continuity of antifascism in a time when the dominant discourse does everything in its power to silence it. It showed that autonomous cultural initiatives like Red Dawns and spaces like Metelkova can function as contact zones for counterpublics whose participation in the official public sphere is limited or – when it does happen – most often misinterpreted.

Other feminist actions have directly intervened into the official public sphere by subverting strategies used by the state for its revisionist purposes. In the night from March 8th to 9th 2007, several activist groups renamed around fifty streets in Ljubljana. Similarly to feminists who renamed streets in Zagreb, Sarajevo (both in 2006) and Kutina (2007), the anonymous alliance in Ljubljana based its action on the statistical fact that the great majority of streets are named after men – and the feminist fact that women’s history needs to be written by women since nobody else is going to do it for them. New names paid homage to The International Women’s Day, Simone de Beauvoir, women artists (Ivana Kobilica, Duša Počkaj, Ela Peroci), pop icons (Lydia Lunch, Queen Latifah), political activists (Sisters Štebi, women who fought in the Spanish Civil War), women protagonists of feminist novels and children’s literature, events from feminist history and motherhood (Street of Your and My Mum). In November 2007, a similar action was carried out in Maribor where the street-renaming intervention by Vstaja Lezbosov (Lesbian Insurrection) invented the names like Lesbian Revolution Square (nr. 69!), Lesbian Path, and Road to the Lesbian, which were left on display for several weeks. However, Path to the Lesbian Peak and Lesbian Brigades Square disappeared immediately: probably because they renamed the seats of The Roman Catholic Diocese and Archdiocese.

These symbolic actions were accompanied by other, more demanding political campaigns that reacted to an immediate threat. The

2006 feminist mobilization of many groups and individuals in support of women's reproductive rights was successful because it paralleled "nation-building" demographic policies with policies of violent inclusion of some and exclusion of other people by the Schengen regime. They claimed that both practices are legitimated by the "discursive colonization"⁶⁴ of the past. In this way, feminists succeeded in forming a varied and large coalition despite the fact that today feminism in Slovenia is not perceived as a legitimate political position.

Antifeminism

Revisionist discourse insists on the image of a "grey and boring" state feminism of the past as the only possible feminism today. Revisionism in its "antipolitical and antifeminist" form, as defined by Vlasta Jalušič, can be observed in the media reactions to all contemporary feminist claims that do not correspond to its stereotypical representation. For example, when "feminists try to disrupt, disprove or shatter (...) traditional, unified political subjects and insist on a different form of political agency that counters collectivist subjects with politics of inclusion or tries to speak (...) from an individual position"⁶⁵ – or, for that matter, also when it promotes collective action.

⁶⁴ Mohanty, 1997, 49. Chandra T. Mohanty used the term "discursive colonization" to criticize those academic discourses that "codify relationship to the Other in implicitly hierarchical terms" (50). While she addressed certain Western feminist writings about "third-world women", the point was not to reproduce "culturalist argument about ethnocentrism" but to "show how ethnocentric universalism is produced in certain analyses" (52), including those written by "third-world" scholars who observe their own culture "through Western eyes" – or by Slovene historians who equate "Slovene" history with hegemonic discourse, and inevitably "other" or "erase" those historic subjects that might question their truth. In Milica Bakić-Hayden's terms, this type of analysis is "nesting orientalisms" (Bakić-Hayden, 1995, 922).

⁶⁵ Močnik, 2000, 40.

Since antifeminist sentiments mostly target symbolic manifestations of feminist politics, such as the International Women's Day, feminist protests against revisionism have frequently called for a redefinition of meanings attached to March 8th. For example, in 2009, celebrating the 100th anniversary of the first International Women's Day, Red Dawns festival organized a discussion about its significance today. The organizers pointed out several issues that call for a reincorporation of political and economic theory – as well as demands for social justice – into contemporary feminisms:

politics of memory, (...) overlooked international engagement of women, (...) the problematic worsening of working conditions for women (part-time jobs, wage disparity, the equalization of retirement age) and some fundamental women's issues: discrimination, reproductive rights, violence, prostitution, sexist media representations, etc.⁶⁶

In short, they stipulated the need for continuity with those elements of feminism from the socialist era that are applicable to the contemporary postsocialist context.

Mainstream media discourse about feminism in Slovenia is dominated by ignorance and contempt. A 2008 survey⁶⁷ showed that "Slovene intelligentsia" – in fact, all the interviewees were popular entertainment figures – equates feminism with "femi-fascism" (Miša Molk) and "something like clericalism" (Marko Crnkovič). In the same survey, humorist Tone Fornezzi publicly attacked feminists as "unfucked women" while another interviewee, ex-model and TV host Jerca Legan said that feminists lost support because they wanted to "persuade women to abandon their femininity". In

⁶⁶ Red Dawns, 2009a.

⁶⁷ Kavčič, 2008a.

an earlier survey,⁶⁸ none of the interviewees objected to having “homosexual neighbours” (unfortunately, they were not asked how they felt about feminist neighbours). Rather than pointing out their acceptance of queers, their statements point to the visibility of politically engaged lesbians and gays who, contrary to feminists, have spoken publicly from a lesbian or gay position long enough that homophobia became publicly unacceptable. That does not mean that today nobody supports women’s rights or criticizes structural, gender-based asymmetry. The point is that those who do it, refuse to speak from a feminist position for pragmatic reasons. Rather than fighting antifeminist prejudices openly (and risking that their position – and possibly their career – will be dismissed as soon as it is identified with feminism), they try to maintain legitimacy by supporting feminist critiques in disguise.

In 1999, Ljubljana-based festival City of Women organized a discussion about antifeminism in former Yugoslavia and other post-socialist states. Vlasta Jalušič’s explanation differed from the widely circulated opinion that women refuse to identify with feminism because of its supposed “unfemininity”, usually connected to claims about the ineffectiveness of contemporary feminist interventions in the public sphere.⁶⁹ Jalušič argued that while this is not the only

⁶⁸ Kavčič, 2008b.

⁶⁹ Lacanian philosopher Renata Salecl claimed that feminists are ineffective because a “serious movement” that would be comparable to its Western manifestations did not exist in socialism and does not exist in postsocialism. Of course, it is highly questionable whether an “effective” feminist movement existed in the West. Assuming that Salecl’s term “serious movement” refers to post-1968 feminist and lesbian movement in the West, it is possible to conclude that due to the prevalence of cultural feminism in the 1980s and feminism’s gradual institutionalization in the 1990s, a “serious” and “effective” Western feminist movement belongs to the realm of psychoanalytic desire, rather than social reality (see Salecl, 1994).

possible opinion, it is the prevailing one and as such, it should be taken into consideration in spite of all other possible interpretations. By moving the debate on antifeminism to the level of representations also in relation to the pragmatic refusal of feminist women and men to be publicly identified as such, she outlined the possibility that many intellectuals, activists and artists prefer to use negative self-presentations that allow them to speak in opposition to “what feminism supposedly represents”.⁷⁰ While feminism never was one, and it is more precise to see it as a “heterogeneity of voices”⁷¹ or a “rhizomatic network”⁷² of often contradictory ideas, united by their antiauthoritarianism and “longing for change”,⁷³ the essential question for those who want to counter “boring and grey” representations of feminism in Slovenia is: which feminisms really became obsolete? Or: which feminisms allow us to think and act in the postsocialist context?

Institutionalisation and Discursive Colonization

Lesbian activist and poet Nataša Sukič claimed that in the neoconservative setting, feminists in Slovenia were late to react to “the rise of the Church, the rise of the Right, the rise of hate speech” and the “need for normality”.⁷⁴ In Svetlana Slapšak’s words, feminism was also late to react to “an incredible wave of patriarchal sentiments and sexism”.⁷⁵ Suzana Tratnik has critiqued feminists of the 1990s for their inability to address consumerism and “pop values, pop identities (...), apolitical standpoints”⁷⁶ and when she was asked why the lesbian

⁷⁰ Močnik, 2000, 65.

⁷¹ Haraway, 1997.

⁷² Braidotti in Močnik, 2000.

⁷³ hooks, 2000.

⁷⁴ Kuhar, 2007, 11.

⁷⁵ Plahuta Simčič, 2006, 15.

⁷⁶ Kuhar, 2007, 11.

movement was not institutionalised to the same extent commented that “the state does not need professional lesbians and gays”⁷⁷. Her answer paid attention to the importance of distinguishing between lesbian and heterosexual feminist politics even when they are united by a strong alliance. This might also be the reason why the lesbian movement in Slovenia continued its work without any major interruptions in the 1990s and the reason why the new generation of politically engaged lesbians regularly frequented the “streetwise school” of activism by writing its own “graffiti textbook”,⁷⁸ rather than attending the newly introduced academic programs in Gender Studies and Gay & Lesbian Studies. In fact, “in the late nineties, when the level of homophobia in Slovenia rose and the educative tools against intolerance were entirely insufficient, a library wall in Maribor was sprayed with a graffiti asking ‘Where are all the lesbian books?’”⁷⁹

While the introduction of feminist academic curricula opened a new, formal channel for transgenerational (re)production of feminist knowledge, it also produced (in the absence of a vibrant autonomous feminist movement) a limited view on feminism as an academic discipline that has little or nothing to do with reality and is therefore of no practical use. Several of my interviewees confirmed this idea. For example, when asked in what way, if at all, her involvement with Red Dawns festival influenced her understanding of feminism, Tanja Škander replied:

I’m gonna give big credit to Red Dawns now since I really thought feminism was some sort of skeleton. Something that doesn’t want to ... something that is happening on the level of struggle for political rights and something that happens in the government, in that Office for Equal Opportunities or what’s its

⁷⁷ Kuhar, 2007, *ibidem*.

⁷⁸ Hvala, 2008, 75.

⁷⁹ Velikonja, 2004, 128.

name now ... It definitely influenced my understanding of feminism in the sense that feminism is something that lives, something with a potential, something that should be continued through other forms and as such an actual political activism that lives on the street, that is present and not necessarily written but realized through action. (...) This might sound naïve, but feminism was mostly something I read about. I was scolded as a feminist already in primary school, so feminism was not something I could apply to life. Because it was rooted in a certain form, and with Red Dawns, this palette became visible. I realized that feminism can be expressed in different ways: through music, visual arts, and political action (like renaming streets) and similar stuff. This is the biggest contribution of Red Dawns festival for me personally.

On the other hand, two volunteers, Danaja Grešak and Anja Kocman, who joined the festival organization team in 2009, confirmed that the spheres are not entirely separate. Danaja was drawn to the festival because she was “interested in feminism”. Her introduction to feminism was academic. After attending Milica Antić-Gaber’s courses at the Faculty of Arts (Sociology of Gender, Gender and Discourse), she replied to Red Dawns’ call for volunteers together with three friends who were also interested in feminism. For Anja, the decisive role was played by her interest in Gay & Lesbian Studies and her interest in techniques of cultural organization. It is interesting to note that despite her participation in Gay & Lesbian Studies, Anja said that before joining Red Dawns, she had “no clue” about feminism.

Sladana Mitrović, a visual artist and organizer with a feminist academic background, replied that even though her views were not changed by the festival, the fact that her video was shown at

the festival “demanded a certain reconsideration of my work. Like: ‘How are you going to define your themes within the frame of feminism?’ (...) By calling itself a feminist festival, Red Dawns has had a strong effect. Not only on other people, also on me.” Ana Jeréb, another co-organizer trained in feminist theory, perceives Red Dawns “as a place of practice where you can make your own views happen or discuss them further. The festival was not where the ideas came from, they came from literature,” she said in reference to feminist and queer theory. And yet, she continued, “When it came to new perspectives, new searches, Red Dawns played a vital role”.

Is it an exaggeration to claim that the predominance of British, North American and French sources used in Gender Studies departments – or, in other words, a form of discursive colonization – is producing young educated feminists who can legitimately conclude that the only available feminist genealogies are Western despite the documented and rich history of local women’s and feminist movements? Discursive colonization would most certainly not be possible or at least not as strong if local feminist history and contemporary feminist public interventions were more visible. Again, this problem is related to the “ideologically induced amnesia, the loss of historic memory due to a persistent embargo on the research and publishing about pre-war feminism in Slovenia”.⁸⁰ Lidija Radojević, one of the interviewees and herself a young researcher of political economy and feminist theory, said that most of the literature used in Gender Studies courses in Slovenia originates from the U.S. and Great Britain “because we are in transition, we are being ideologically interpolated into a new system”. Immediately afterwards, she pointed out the problem lying at the heart of this “conceptual import”:

⁸⁰ Renér, 1996, 60.

Feminism forgot about a lot of things when it focused on identity politics exclusively; it forgot about the social element that was once already there. To connect queer and feminist politics with that – that’s the essence! This is how you touch the deepest roots of chauvinism.

The prevalence of identity politics or politics of recognition in post-socialist feminist theory has also been criticized by American philosopher and critical theorist Nancy Fraser. Like Rada Iveković, she argues that “the postsocialist condition” adequately describes both the East and West since they are interrelated discursive categories and material contexts. They are connected by

an absence of any credible overarching emancipatory project despite the proliferation of fronts of struggle; a general decoupling of the cultural politics of recognition from the social politics of redistribution; and a decentering of claims for equality in the face of aggressive marketization and sharply rising material inequality.⁸¹

Fraser claims that “the turn to recognition” of cultural differences in feminism turned into “a tragic historical irony” because it appeared in the least appropriate moment: “it dovetailed all too neatly with a hegemonic neoliberalism that wants nothing more than to repress all memory of social egalitarianism”.⁸² Her call for a post-socialism that “incorporates, rather than repudiates, the best of socialism” and a radical democracy that “combine[s] the struggle for an antiessentialist multiculturalism with the struggle for social equality”⁸³ is echoed in Lidija’s statement. In the Slovene context,

⁸¹ Naples, 2004, 1103-4.

⁸² Naples, 2004, 1111.

⁸³ Naples, 2004, 1104.

the historic irony is even greater since feminist theory in the 1980s was preoccupied with social justice, yet today, instead of using this as a possible starting point for revisions and development of a feminist theory that is relevant for the present condition, that legacy has been either discarded (by academic feminism) or is used in antifeminist bashing to delegitimize contemporary feminist claims.

Over-genderization

In Biljana Kašić's words, "over-genderization"⁸⁴ is another problematic aspect of identity politics' import. She claimed that during the 1990s feminists from the South-East (scholars, grassroots activists and artists) accepted the use of "gender" as a concept and as a basic Western assumption, a convention which was never "deeply explored or examined from the inside out", and thus turned into a "free-floating signifier marking an epistemological time-lag".⁸⁵ In her view, rather than contributing to the analysis of poignant local issues, gender mainstreaming obscured them since gender politics introduced a specific set of feminist preoccupations that had little or nothing to do with the political reality of a disintegrating country on the brink of war.

A practical consequence of accepting gender-exclusive perspectives in the period of intensifying ethnic and religious conflicts – and eventually of war – were feminist analyses that failed to see the ways in which women were (re)appropriated by nationalist and religious discourses. How else could "patriotic" feminists from Croatia and Serbia claim that mass rape was an ethnically-specific genocidal tactic, used only by "the other" aggressor? In addition, "the divisions among Yugoslav feminists on the basis of national identification and/or ideological orientation affected Western in-

⁸⁴ Kašić, 2004, 484.

⁸⁵ Kašić, 2004, 480.

terpretations of gender-specific violence in Yugoslav wars”.⁸⁶ In the United States, “the representation of mass rapes in the feminist press was highly conditioned by (...) feminist debates on rape and pornography”⁸⁷ since authors like Catharine MacKinnon appropriated this context-specific debate for their own anti-porn and sex-repressive version of liberal feminism by literally claiming: “With this war, pornography emerges as a tool of genocide”.⁸⁸ Coupled with the lack of intersectional analyses, “radical feminist narratives of rape coincided with nationalist narratives of the ethnic self and other”⁸⁹ and revealed “the pervasiveness of orientalist patterns in representing the non-Western world, to which some feminist approaches remain susceptible”.⁹⁰

The 1991-95 wars reinforced the balkanist representation of former Yugoslavia as a “powder keg” where violence and “ethnic hatred” are the norm. While Western media represented the Balkans as its rediscovered “exotic” and “irrational” Other, some Western feminists represented Yugoslav feminists

as dealing with violence as a “natural” or almost an “essentialized” issue for them. As such, most invitations and demands for “expertise” or testimonies from Western feminists, in addition to financial support, were centred on issues of violence.⁹¹

Specifically, they supported local (chapters of international) NGOs and academic feminists who dealt with the issue of gender-based and ethnic violence. On the other hand, the socio-political climate surrounding ethnocentric conflicts had a profound influence on

⁸⁶ Batinić, 2001, 18.

⁸⁷ Batinić, 2001, *ibidem*.

⁸⁸ Batinić, 2001, 16.

⁸⁹ Batinić, 2001, 18.

⁹⁰ Batinić, 2001, 1.

⁹¹ Kašić, 2004, 483.

shaping women's political subjectivity and their activism, which was forced to deal with the issue of violence. Since ethnocentric appropriations of women's bodies are resurfacing in both West and East, these studies gained a relevance that goes beyond the territory of former Yugoslavia. Still, if Gender Studies students today have the impression that feminists from former Yugoslavia are studying exclusively violence and nationalism, their impression is almost correct. In fact, while it proves that discursive colonization has material consequences, it also demonstrates that such colonization is only possible if there is no discourse to counter it.

The Possibility of Transnational Dialogue

Despite asymmetrical conditions of work and power relations between academic feminists from the West and East, my sources demonstrate the continuous effort at dialogue that has been made "on both sides". For example, Lidija Radojević was surprised to find out that international solidarity has a very long history indeed. Reading Jelena Petrović's PhD dissertation (2009) about Yugoslav feminists in the interwar (1918-1941) period, she learned that

in the period of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (...) we had an unimaginably dynamic scene - Macedonian women were petitioning for the release of Rosa Luxemburg! There were liberal, communist, Christian-socialist, even conservative feminists. That was a hundred years ago and today, nothing's left of it. That is why I think education is so fundamental. We are still sensitive to this amnesia whereas the West has been conscious about the present for quite a while now. We went through a more drastic change and we are still bothered by the fact that certain things have been forgotten, also because women here had had enormous gains that women in the West could only dream of. (...) In the 1970s, we had our own theories, our own practice, and our

own typology of feminism. We have to preserve this tradition. The West did not bring it.

Lesbian and feminist grassroots initiatives have indeed stipulated the importance of nourishing the memory of past efforts as they implicitly criticize both feminist academic and neoconservative appropriations of history. In this way, Red Dawns' intense transnational networking and educative program could be interpreted as an implicit protest against discursive colonization; as an advocacy of creative "transculturation of ideas".⁹²

Theories of unidirectional transfer of ideas (from the West to the East) are indeed challenged by the concept of transculturation, understood as a complex process of co-presence, interaction, change and circulation of feminist ideas and practices in conditions of social inequality. Elsewhere⁹³ I have compared the similarities between economic (neoliberalism, crisis) and political situations (ethnocentrism, revisionism, cultural relativism) in the East and West in order to suggest that it makes sense to address these issues relationally. I discussed examples of revisionism, antifeminism and demographic policies and suggested that feminists today cannot theorize about these links unless they accept intersectionality (as their method), demand the redistribution of wealth (as their policy) and think about ways to start some "roaring fires" (as their strategy). In Slovenia, unidirectional transfer of knowledge, coupled with appropriations of memory, have been criticized in academia. Feminist and critical theorists such as Nikolai Jeffs and Svetlana Slapšak have called for the necessity of situating local knowledge production on the "world's intellectual market" from the point of view of a "colonized subject, the non-Western subject, who has been in-

⁹² Pratt, 1992; Cerwonka, 2008.

⁹³ Hvala, 2009.

structed by Western feminisms about what feminism is and what is happening to the colonized subjects”.⁹⁴ Their claims resonate with Biljana Kašić’s hope that the recent “tendency to focus on internal socialist history from a feminist perspective” would “help not only to create theoretical explanations that link women’s benefits in the socialist period to socialist failures”⁹⁵ but would also enable a more productive dialog between feminists from the East and West. Moreover, it would help feminists recognize the commonalities between all regions that are equally peripheral to the centres of power: for start, to quote political theorist Veronica Schild, the “political dangers of forgetting this real history, and the responsibilities that intellectuals, including feminist scholars, must of necessity bear for this price of forgetting”.⁹⁶

Feminist and Queer Festival Red Dawns: A Case Study

In this chapter, I am going to discuss several aspects of Red Dawns, which need to be discussed in order to contextualize my focus on the festival as a (potential) counterpublic. The first part addresses the reasons why its founders decided to organize a women’s festival in 2000. The following part explains the festivals’ title references and relates them to the self-defined and desired aims of the organizers. Since the concept of the festival changes over the years, I pay attention to several rearticulations of Red Dawns’ general idea, most obviously represented in the change of terminology used to describe the festival. I also link the conceptual development from a “women’s” to a “feminist and queer” festival to Red Dawns’ growing international network of allies and co-workers. The ways in which this shift influenced the organizers’ understanding of Red Dawns

⁹⁴ STA, 2002.

⁹⁵ Kašić, 2004, 480.

⁹⁶ Hvala, 2007.

as a (potential) counterpublic is discussed in the chapter about ACC Metelkova mesto and its struggle for spatial justice. Internationally, the perceived political significance of the festival is discussed in relation to the characteristics of Ladyfests in Western Europe. Since the festival is embedded in the local and international context simultaneously, I discuss both frames of reference in the same chapter. The final chapter, based on excerpts taken from my interviews with Red Dawns organizers, co-organizers and volunteers discusses all issues mentioned above from the perspective of feminist political theory. Specifically, I reconsider Nancy Fraser's claim that the emancipatory potential of feminist-queer counterpublics is to be found in the dialectics of their internal and external function from the perspective of Red Dawns festival as it was experienced and perceived by my seventeen interviewees – and myself.

The Launch

According to Nataša Serec, the president of the association KUD Mreža and one of the few founding organizers still involved in Red Dawns, she and Dragana Rajković (at the time a member of lesbian-feminist group Kasandra) came up with the idea of organizing a festival after several discussions in which they

realized that in Metelkova – that was before 2000 – all key positions were occupied by girls, women (...), and we, the women in Metelkova, were working in solidarity with each other. We were prepared to work for free and were dedicated, willing to keep this place since, at the time, its fate was still very uncertain. (...) On the other hand, we noticed that when the journalists came and there was an opportunity to boast with our efforts, men appeared first, our colleagues, who were keener on this kind of exposure than we were. Ok, it was also our own fault since we never wanted to put ourselves in the forefront, like a kind of funk or

something. (...) Well, in order to abandon our invisibility we came to the idea of a festival that would give us the possibility to show and affirm our abilities as organizers, as Metelkova activists, and also as artists. This was the basic idea that got us started.

The first edition of Red Dawns involved women organizers, artists and activists from ACC Metelkova mesto even though, according to Nataša, they wanted to reach a wider audience and step out of the activist-squatter fortress of Metelkova. In her words, the basic idea was to “bring feminist issues into public space, to discuss them”. Promotional leaflets from 2000 list two more groups that were involved in the organization of the first Red Dawns: lesbian club Monokel (ŠKUC-LL) and the now defunct Women’s Centre, both located in Metelkova. Many women played several roles at once. For example, sculptress Urša Toman participated both as an artist and organizer. Similarly, Urška Merc, at the time a member of the Women’s Centre, remembers that she “simply helped” with whatever work had to be done. She adds that being part of the Women’s Centre “went hand in hand” with participating in the festival, thus suggesting that the festival was organized as a joint effort of all women in Metelkova who wanted to “abandon their invisibility”.

Jadranka Ljubičič (curator of Alkatraz Gallery, member of association KUD Mreža and another Red Dawns organizer who has been part of the team since 2000) stipulated that the “spark that gave birth to the festival” would not have happened without “the important presence of a group of lesbian activists who contributed a different kind of program to Metelkova”. She continued to say that it was difficult to create a space where women artists, activists and organizers could learn to work with each other – and deal with the conflicts arising from their first joint effort – in an environment that was politically progressive yet not necessarily supportive of their initiative:

It was crucial that the fest and the pre-fest preparations were organized by a team of people who hung out together (...). As an organizer, you developed some sort of sensitivity (...), you became more, let's put it this way, tolerant towards certain things within the team while earlier you ... you did not have this experience, you did not know how to react, how to turn it into something useful.

In other words, bringing “feminist issues into public space” presupposed the creation of a functioning collective of women organizers, activists and artists who, at least at the very beginning, were not necessarily comfortable with the idea of working in gender-specific groups due to their unpopularity. Like the City of Women festival team before it, the Red Dawns group had to counter

the fact that remained more or less hidden for long decades: that rock (and later punk) was predominantly male and that, in addition, those rockers were as sexist as the daddies they were opposing; that for women's production, being part of that culture was as hard as surviving in the mainstream culture.⁹⁷

None of my interviewees spoke directly about the reasons why they chose the festival format as the most suitable for their purposes. However, when asked what they found most memorable about the festival, the large majority spoke about festive sociability or “the great feeling”, “incredible atmosphere”, “group energy”, “a carnivalesque feeling that anything is possible” and “great conversations” that gave them “brain food” for future work, therefore indirectly confirming that they chose to organize a festival (rather than a series of discussions or workshops, for example) because it created a highly interactive public space that was supportive of their feminist

⁹⁷ Lesničar Pučko, 2007, 83.

or/and lesbian identity – and fun! Once Red Dawns' internal function was fulfilled, it also became possible to discuss, create and present feminist art, activism and theory in a public setting.

Title References

Dragana Rajković and Nataša Serec chose the title “Red Dawns” (*Rdeče zore* in Slovene) after one of their discussions about women's activism, the strategic use of political violence and the militant women's group Rote Zora from Germany. Rote Zora detonated their first bomb in 1974 at the Federal Constitutional Court in Karlsruhe the day after it confirmed the infamous “Paragraph 218” which limited access to abortion. In Rote Zora's view, state repression of women's fundamental right to self-determination demanded a radical political opposition, which they carried out through a politics of property damage. Oliver Ressler, the director of the art video *Rote Zora* (2000) shown at Red Dawns festival in 2003, interviewed Rote Zora member Corinna Kawaters who said that it was their principle to avoid injuring anyone. In Oliver Tolmein's words, they were an “armed group who, however, battled often enough with the typewriter”.⁹⁸ The group collaborated with Revolutionäre Zellen and fought against atomic, genetic and reproductive technologies, targeting companies such as Bayer, Siemens, Schering and Nixdorf as well as research institutes and the property owned by traffickers of women.

The group took its name from red-haired Zora, the penniless heroine of the youth novel *Die rote Zora und ihre Bande* (1941) where Croatian children orphaned by the war realize that they can only defy social injustice by sticking together. The novel was written by an exiled German writer of Jewish descent called Kurt Kläber under the pseudonym Kurt Held. Kurt was a political immigrant of

⁹⁸ Ressler, 2000.

the Nazi era. As a communist, he had to oblige the rule of creative silence even during his Swiss exile. After Stalin's deal with Hitler, he abandoned communism as a betrayed ideology but kept his anarchist ideals. Red-haired Zora and her company of orphaned misfits personify those very ideals. The guerrilla group Rote Zora chose this name because

it seems to be a male privilege to build gangs or to act outside the law. Yet particularly because girls and women are strangled by thousands of personal and political chains this should make us masses of 'bandits' fighting for our freedom, our dignity, and our humanity. Law and order are fundamentally against us, even if we have hardly achieved any rights and have to fight for them daily. Radical women's struggles and loyalty to the law - there is no way they go together!⁹⁹

Red Dawns festival never advocated or used political violence. However, in their explanation of the festival's name, the organizers made explicit links to both the guerrilla group and Kläber's novel. On their website, they wrote that they support Rote Zora's belief that "the struggle for women's rights is undone, that it goes hand in hand with struggles for social justice, and that we cannot be contented with reformist politics".¹⁰⁰

A literal translation of "die rote Zora" from German to English would read as "the red Zora". In Slovene, "zora" also means "dawn" ("zore" is the plural version), which is why the festival organizers chose to translate the name to English as Red Dawns, not as Red Zora. By preferring the figurative meaning to the literal translation, the festival title acquires an additional dimension, one that leaves space for those interpretations that are not connected to the already

⁹⁹ Star, 2002, 101.

¹⁰⁰ Red Dawns, 2010.

existing references.¹⁰¹ In Slovene, the festival title can be associated with a socialist (“red”) future (“dawn”) or “the promise of a better tomorrow – for everyone”.¹⁰² The imagery used to promote the festival on posters, leaflets, T-shirts and other merchandize changes between festival editions, but relies on red and black as their representative colours – colours that are traditionally associated with anarcho-syndicalism. The first Red Dawns poster from 2000 depicted three smashed kaki fruits (persimmons), and a spoon on a white round plate. The picture was taken from a bird’s-eye view and had a fluid quality similar to (menstrual) blood. The outlines of the image were reminiscent of the woman symbol that was also reproduced underneath the image, defining Red Dawns as a “festival of ♀ production”. The historicisation or retrospective conceptualisation of the first festival edition is evident from the disparity between the oral and written history of Red Dawns. When interviewed, both Jadranka Ljubičič and Nataša Serec said that the initial idea was to support “young and emerging women artists from Metelkova”. While women artists stationed in ACC Metelkova mesto could be generally described as “young” and “emerging” it would be an exaggeration to say that these artists, following the festival’s self-description, were “expressing their creativity in self-organized ways, capturing the do-it-yourself ethic of constructive rebellion against capitalist consumption of our voices”.¹⁰³ In 2000, the festival did not – and could not – include only politically challenging artists. On the con-

¹⁰¹ It is also interesting to note that *Die rote Zora und ihre Bande* was never translated to Slovene and consequently very few people in Slovenia know about it. More people know the depoliticized television series from 1979 and the 2008 film version. However, the main reference for people familiar with the history of radical left-wing activism in Germany remains the urban guerrilla group Rote Zora.

¹⁰² Red Dawns, 2003.

¹⁰³ Red Dawns, *ibidem*.

trary, Nataša Serec commented that ten years ago, women musicians and other artists were generally hard to find, “that is why we, despite our wishes, hosted women artists regardless of the concepts they stood for. We also couldn’t afford to choose artists who dealt with specific issues. The first five years were really difficult.” However, the history of the festival, written retrospectively, does capture the counterpublic aspect of the first festival edition well by claiming that Red Dawns’ declared goal was to “celebrate our lives and redefine public space in order to make it accessible for the creativity and socializing of women on our own terms: in a non-hierarchical, non-exploitative and anti-capitalistic manner”.¹⁰⁴

A History of Rearticulations

The concept of the festival has shifted over the years despite the organizer’s insistence that “this is a festival without a concept” since “concepts are expensive. And spoiled – it’s so difficult to please them”.¹⁰⁵ This half-joking statement from 2005 was explained by Red Dawns co-organizer and designer Anna Ehrlemark after the ninth festival edition in an article entitled “What’s Wrong with Red Dawns?” She began by mentioning the composer, activist and organizer Reni Hofmüller, one of Red Dawns’ 2008 guests who spoke at the presentation of the *New Feminism: Queer and Networking Conditions* anthology.

She said that we should think history (including the present) like a patchwork of mutually excluding truths. ‘Cyberfeminism simply does not exist. And yet, there is no doubt that something that could be called cyberfeminism exists.’ Festivals like ours always face the risk that some visitors and participants are going to wish to find something that would resemble a mani-

¹⁰⁴ Red Dawns, 2010.

¹⁰⁵ Red Dawns, 2005.

festo, a position which would be able to merge our efforts into a unified resolution. There is no such thing. A lot of work, time and space were given to artists, activists, theoreticians and audience members who have something to say (...) because we are convinced that they are important (...). And that's the trick: they concern you whether you like it or not. Disagreements are there to stay since any other position on our side would be forcing our interpretation to everybody else. And, of course, we don't agree with that.¹⁰⁶

And yet, Red Dawns' collectively signed introductory texts do read as manifestoes that frequently address the playfulness of festive sociability. The conceptual changes or rearticulations of the festival's general idea can be observed in those same texts; in the terminology that was used at different points in time to describe the program. The shift from a "women's" to a "feminist and queer" festival was, in Nataša Serec's view, "a natural development" related to the organizers' personal growth or the process of becoming feminists: "We did not call ourselves 'a feminist festival' until we knew what it means – and learnt how to explain to others what we mean by it. We didn't do it because that's what our scene is about – we don't have a scene". Her implicit and somewhat generalized comparison referred to

what sometimes happens with women's festivals or especially with anarcho-feminist festivals, also with Ladyfests; that since they have a scene, for example, a feminist anti-fascist scene, they always come up with the same old slogans. (...) If they would call their festivals 'feminist' – I'm not sure if they would know why they did it. But there, in larger European cities, things are different because they have strong scenes.

¹⁰⁶ Ehrlemark, 2008, 25.

Ironically, Red Dawns' conceptual development from a "women's" to a "feminist and queer" festival was encouraged by its gradual inclusion in the international network of similar initiatives in Western Europe and the region of former Yugoslavia. Another paradox is that while the organizers claimed that their festival was "marginal (...)" even though we're talking Paris and (...) even Amsterdam and Prule!",¹⁰⁷ Red Dawns' local visibility and popularity gradually grew beyond Metelkova's walls. They managed to reach a wider audience and gain recognition in Slovene independent and, surprisingly, also mainstream media, thus becoming a local reference point for contemporary art and activism from a feminist and/or queer point of view. At the same time, the statement about their supposed "marginality" has to be read in relation to the festival's professional "big sister", International Contemporary Art Festival City of Women.

Until 2006, the organizers called Red Dawns "a women's pocket festival" which supports the "creativity, work and socializing" of "female artists and activists"¹⁰⁸ who question stereotypical representations of femininity and masculinity. They insisted on promoting "women's art" and "women's organizing" until the seventh edition when Red Dawns became an "international feminist and queer festival" or "celebration" which aimed to support those artistic and activist "deviations from heteronormative 'destiny'" that oppose "every-day hatred, disrespect and exploitation of people in any neoliberal society".¹⁰⁹ The seventh festival edition of Red Dawns in 2006 was the first to use more explicit imagery. Instead of reusing the black and red image of a back trouser pocket ("pocket festival") designed by Phant&Puntza, the new graphic designer, Anna Ehrlemark, used Igor Hofbauer's drawing of a large rat biting into

¹⁰⁷ Red Dawns, 2005.

¹⁰⁸ Red Dawns, 2006.

¹⁰⁹ Red Dawns, 2007.

a Barbie doll. While the rat was adopted from ACC Metelkova mesto's logo, the Barbie doll was the first image to highlight the difference between stereotypical and desired representations of femininity, thus finally moving away from the – theoretically and practically – controversial subject of “women”. In the same way, the 2006 introductory text was the first to invite “women, men and others” to join the festival, the first to make an explicit link to the history of International Women's Day, the first to oppose “right-wing falsifications of history” and the first to make a tribute to Red Dawns' local feminist and antifascist predecessors. The same text framed their understanding of feminism and queer politics within a politics of recognition but also tried to link them to the demand for redistribution of wealth:

Red Dawns is a queer festival that dares to ignore expectations, habits, concepts and roles, which ‘fatally’ define us as either women or men (...). We urge you, our political allies, to rethink sexualities and genders in the context of your everyday fights for social justice.¹¹⁰

The introduction to the eighth festival edition in 2007 repeated this political agenda. This time, the promotional materials depicted a bird-woman-pilot flapping her wings in front of the rising sun. The image can be read as a new contribution to Red Dawns' “red thread” that can be traced at least to 2005 when the organizers self-ironically affirmed the utopian nature of their calls for “space, the possibility and the power to create the conditions worthy of (...) our imagination” by quoting “the cry of an unknown song by a band no longer in existence: ‘When we move it's a movement!’”.¹¹¹ In 2008, the introductory text was more specific, related to the program con-

¹¹⁰ Red Dawns, 2006.

¹¹¹ Red Dawns, 2005.

tent and the international feminist-queer network it became part of. The text addressed the desire to “enable connections between art and activism, activism and theory, theory and art”; the hope that practical skills and knowledge gained at the festival would continue to circulate after the festival; the hope that friendships made at Red Dawns would last; and the willingness to

poke the sores that hurt; those caused by the personified fist of patriarchal, falogocentric and heteronormative (in short, too common) violence against women, children and men who are not ‘manly enough’.¹¹²

The 2008 festival edition was supported financially by EYFA, an organization based in Amsterdam which connected Amsterdam (Eclectic Tech Carnival), Graz ([prologue]) and Ljubljana (Red Dawns) with a project entitled *Trilogy: Women Crossing Communities*. This project questioned the conditions of work for European women who advocate, employ and develop contemporary theory, art and activism as community-building practices. While the Graz-based symposium, exhibition and journal [*prologue*] *III* focused on performative strategies of resistance and Red Dawns dealt with local feminist and queer politics in art, the main concern of nomadic Eclectic Tech Carnival was women’s use and development of information technologies in art and activism. EYFA’s financial support made it possible for female cybernauts, artists, activists and theoreticians from an array of European countries to meet repeatedly and in person. As such, it provided the necessary material conditions for the development of creative transnational collaborations. Similarly, the 2008 Red Dawns program focused on different techniques of knowledge production and exchange:

¹¹² Red Dawns, 2008.

so that, when the caravan of artists, activists, and theoreticians is going to leave town, we won't be left with unforgettable memories and broken hearts alone, but with something more ... palpable. For instance, with the open code programming knowledge of the The GenderChangers collective, the auto-repair skills offered by Ksenija Glavač, the burnout prevention techniques taught by Belgrade's Women at Work, and the viewpoints of no less than sixty feminists who confront global capitalism in the book *New Feminisms: Queer and Networking Conditions*.¹¹³

Commenting on the mechanisms of exclusion that limit transnational mobility of people and free exchange of knowledge, the organizers added that

no doubt, we will also be left with another girl in love from this or that other, starless Europe. She will try hard to persuade Slovene authorities that it's not the country she fell in love with, but that she's prepared to do a lot (marry, register, whatever they want) to stay with the woman, man, the beloved and wonderful being of her choice.¹¹⁴

The ninth Red Dawns festival was a profuse event, organized by KUD Mreža and ten local co-organizing groups, assisted by two EYFA members and fifteen volunteers. The fifty workshop moderators, feminist theoreticians, historians, writers, storytellers, performers, visual artists, dancers, comedians, musicians, and other participants were joined by fifteen Trilogy artists, journalists, media activists and philosophers who made a considerable contribution to Red Dawns' program. The festival celebrated creativity and work-in-process rather than the production of objects as a motivating ap-

¹¹³ Red Dawns, *ibidem*.

¹¹⁴ Red Dawns, *ibidem*.

proach to collaborative work and active audience participation. Noha Ramadan's workshop *Body as the Site of Action* and the resulting street action were, in this sense, most memorable.¹¹⁵

Red Dawns therefore opened possibilities and offered an inclusive environment for exercising the right of women to expression, to show, perform, disseminate, and share their ideas, problems, creativity and care. Participants met each other, saw each other's work and ideas, and discussed future co-operations. The audience was exposed to new art, contemporary feminist politics and moreover, had the possibility to join the workshops, discussions, and street action. The strong feeling of solidarity was stipulated by the willingness of guests and volunteers to help each other in creating a temporary community of female artists, activists and theoreticians. On the tenth anniversary in 2009, the organizers described the festival as one that deals with "the inevitable contradictions that arise from the desire to politicize art and aestheticize politics".¹¹⁶ In ac-

¹¹⁵ "Noha spoke about the necessity of moving beyond activism based on slogans and banners as they tend to petrify subject positions instead of trying to subvert the accepted logic and *status quo*. At the workshop, Noha showed examples of actions based on what she calls 'the revolutionary need to liberate our bodies in public spaces'. She claimed that by transgressing the borders of what is perceived as acceptable behaviour, we carry the potential to recognize moments of freedom and expand them to other contexts. The subsequent street action consisted of an unusually large number of affectionate same-sex couples that kept strolling across the city centre bridge Tromostovje. Couples gradually began to exaggerate their body moves and stipulated the actions' disturbing nature by walking too slow, walking backwards, lying on the street, kissing passionately ... If the moment of freedom is really limited to your own perception, I would say that the culminating point of the action was its conclusion: the participants went to the sexist advertisement for women's underwear behind Hotel Union and took off their underwear in front of it. You have to try it sometime - the feeling is great!" (Ehrlemark, 2008, 25)

¹¹⁶ Red Dawns, 2009.

cord with their tradition of combining pragmatic calls for a festive counterpublic with a desire for structural change, the organizers invited the audience to join Red Dawns' "utopian dance on the slippery edge of a most certainly real world of binaries ..."¹¹⁷

Queering Red Dawns

What – or whom – exactly did the festival queer once it changed its title description from a “women’s” to a “feminist and queer festival”? Since most of the organizers are young, left-wing, middle class, educated and ethnically Slovene straight women, this change could suggest they were trying to open up the festive space – and themselves – to a variety of other positions, most obviously lesbian and gay ones. Since Red Dawns started in 2000 as a co-operation between feminist and lesbian groups, the change – in this case – merely suggests an adjustment of terminology to the festival’s reality in which lesbian and straight women (and recently, gays) cooperate with each other. Suzana Tratnik, who collaborated with Red Dawns from 2000 to 2007 as part of club Monokel, confirmed this. When asked whether she thinks the festival has lived up to its declared “queer politics”, she said: “My feeling is that the festival was queer before it started calling itself that, for example, we had trans guests earlier, so I think the title ‘queer’ is completely appropriate. It’s not like you can measure it in percentage”.

While most of my interviewees recognized the fact that queer activism and theory developed within the North American gay and lesbian scene as a critical response to assimilational tendencies of conservative and liberal activists who struggled for public recognition on heteronormative terms, they also claimed that today queer politics can no longer be equated solely with the struggle for the

¹¹⁷ Red Dawns, *ibidem*.

¹¹⁸ Pišek, 2009.

recognition of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual and other marginal positions on their terms. Commenting on Mojca Pišek's article¹¹⁸ about "queer (non)identity", published in a major weekly newspaper, Ana Jereb said that the article was "misleading" because it reduced the thematic scope of queer activism and theory to gender identity, thus ignoring the wider social context that could suggest that marginal gender and sexual positions are in a structurally similar position to other marginal subjectivities: "In this way, people will get the idea that queer is only about gays and lesbians. I think this equation misses the point. It's not about who you sleep with."

For Ana Jereb, queer politics are about

the opening of wild possibilities. Because the term is so wide, so undefined, and so problematic – and I'm not saying that feminism isn't like that – it offers many possibilities for our future views, different perspectives, for our self-critique: 'Why do I think this way? Let's turn it around! We *are* having a good time but ...' It is the opportunity for self-critique, for permanent self-examinations.

Due to the terms' scope, the "queering" element can be understood in several other ways. For example, as an attempt to deconstruct, explode or abolish the institution of gender. In theory, the queering of ethnically bounded women's and feminist counterpublics should enable the entry and accommodation of racialized subjects as well. When gendered, racialized and other "marked" subjects enter the official public sphere, they are highly visible. They mark it in a way that shows "that the white male body is the norm".¹¹⁹ They do not have the right to occupy that space and are often perceived as "aliens", "invaders" or "trespassers".¹²⁰ When Nirmal Puwar wrote

¹¹⁹ Puwar, 2004, 8.

¹²⁰ Puwar, 2004, 1.

about the entry of women and racialized subjects to the official public sphere, her book on political theory, *Space Invaders: Race, Gender and Bodies out of Place* (2004), clearly borrowed its title from science fiction, thus suggesting that the new terms of coexistence are by no means easy: “this is an encounter that causes disruption, necessitates negotiation and invites complicity”.¹²¹ This type of queer politics would be closer to anarcho-syndicalism than to lesbian and gay struggles for legal equality and public recognition.

In practice, the contexts in which the term “queer” commonly appears in Western Europe – and in Slovenia – suggest that queer politics have been commodified and reduced to “an inner-city clique discothèque”, as Anna Ehrlemark put it. In her view, queer is not – or shouldn’t be – only about partying even though “the mission” of Red Dawns is also “to incorporate the queer concept into the mainstream alternative culture [*laughs*], to make gay parties (...) feel more open”. For Ana Jereb, queer politics are in danger of being reduced to “the choice of clothes I’ll wear today, the things I’ll buy tomorrow (...), narrowing everything to consumption”. Lidija Radojević’s article about Red Dawns, entitled “The Universalisation of Struggle and Particular Obstacles, or Between March 8th and A Thousand Tiny Sexes”,¹²² also addresses the danger of understanding queer as an all-inclusive concept, a concept that can be stretched to accommodate the needs of everyone who thinks of themselves as queer. For her, the problem lies in the assumption that by “being queer”, you automatically become “subversive”, whereas in reality the proliferation of identity positions is, again, all too easily reduced to appearances and lifestyle. For Lidija, the introduction of a queer perspective to Red Dawns’ program is important because it “introduced a global trend and dis-

¹²¹ Puwar, 2004, *ibidem*.

¹²² Radojević, 2007.

course to a local environment where it is not known yet". She continued to explain that

'queer' doesn't have solid grounds. (...) All concepts are vague until they gain a solid foundation. Concepts can be tied to a local environment only when a scene supports them. By engaging with the concept, creating new practices, a new language – we don't know how to translate the concept because we don't have a scene. It takes time, work, and then the concept can grow by itself. Probably, it's going to be different from the American version. For now, we are copy-pasting it, because it was developed there, but once it is planted in fertile grounds ... I think it's good that Red Dawns grabbed it.

Both Jadranka Ljubičić and I have had objections to the use of the term queer in Red Dawns' title since the festival lacked program items which addresses either coalition-building between different counterpublics or other-than-female marginal subjects. Lidija replied by saying that

as a festival, you can't please everybody. You do what you are best at doing. The festival is open: it never refused to co-operate with anybody who wanted to do something or, refused co-operation if the proposal was ideologically incompatible with the festival. Red Dawns shouldn't feel bad about not offering certain items to certain cultural consumers. It is the same with 'queer': what it means here is going to be defined by those people who engage with it. Until then, we can read other people's literature.

Anna Ehrlemark agreed that

the definition of the festival is important from the pure definition point, that it says 'feminist' because that is what we aspire to. And we added 'queer' because of widening the scope (...). The

term “queer” is not so much connected to partying even if it’s such an applicable, such an extremely vague term. To me it does not only mean that we have an ambiguous sexuality – like we are sexual, not without any prefix – because that’s a way of seeing it that is only connected to sex, as in our porn program. For me it also means that you are including questions like (...) when we’re talking about all the lonely male ‘gastarbajters’ [migrant workers] in Ljubljana. (...) It is the attempt to be as inclusive as possible, in a way also to be self-critical (...), a reminder to not conceive queerness in too narrow ways.

The willingness to queer the festival’s agenda is visible from the organizers’ frequent attempts to redefine their political position. The 2009 festival introduction stipulated that “rather than defining them once and for all, Red Dawns fest still prefers to question the possible intersections between feminisms and queer politics”.¹²³ Ehrlemark commented that Red Dawns’ attempts to “mix concepts which are not mixable” is a “blasphemy” since “nothing can be both feminist and queer, both are extremely wide and contradictory concepts”. And yet, she continued, Red Dawns’ aim is “not to create false communities” but to “raise the level of understanding or debate or conflict”:

Both in the local scene and with our foreign guests, we are always having internal conflicts between concepts where it becomes so obvious that queer is not the same thing in Amsterdam or Belgrade. (...) For me, these moments were always the best moments: when the internal conflicts started coming out under controlled circumstances (...), when these idyllic feelings – ‘Oh, we are all from the same scene and we love each other!’ – start getting some cracks.

¹²³ Red Dawns, 2009.

Visual artist and Red Dawns co-organizer Slađana Mitrović aged that, for her

the point is in the debates that resulted from my participation at the festival (...). It is essential that those debates happened. You have to start positioning yourself within a defined context. I even think that reflection is worth more than the exhibition or performance itself.

For Urška Merc, another long-time Red Dawns co-organizer and web mistress, the queer dimension of the festival is important because “by introducing the term ‘queer’, the discussions about which events can be included in the festival have changed, and that is what keeps the festival going”.

The queering of Red Dawns has an additional, utopian dimension. Questions like “Are you interested in feminist struggles of the past – or those that are being fought right now? Do you think about the future? Are you interested in the predictable and ‘real’ or that which you can dream of?”¹²⁴ posed in the tenth festival introduction, speak about a different understanding of history, one that “defies repeatability or generalization and (...) welcomes the surprise of the future as it makes clear the specificities and particularities, the events, of history”.¹²⁵ This view is in direct contrast with the post-1968 tendencies in Europe where declarations about “the death of utopia” and “the death of history” have changed the meaning of utopia by increasing the feeling of its “impossibility and absurdity”.¹²⁶ In *Memory and Utopia* (2007), Luisa Passerini claims that in 1968, the “subjects of history were viewed as subjects of action and knowledge as well as subjects of

¹²⁴ Red Dawns, 2009.

¹²⁵ Grosz, 2000, 1018.

¹²⁶ Passerini, 2007, 297.

desire”.¹²⁷ In other words, they were orientated towards the future and demanded “the impossible” because they understood that “the object of desire counts less than the state of desire”.¹²⁸ Neoconservatism disqualified the very idea of a future, different from the past and the present. In this setting, utopian imagination survived in the form of “nostalgia for resistance (...), orientated towards the past rather than the future, a memory, rather than a source of hope”.¹²⁹

Comparison with Ladyfests

The first Ladyfest took place in 2000 in Olympia, WA (U.S.). It embraced a feminist agenda and labelled itself a “non-profit community-based event designed by and for women to showcase, celebrate and encourage the artistic, organizational, and political work and talents of women”.¹³⁰ It grew out of the North American riot grrrl movement of the 1990s, which was mainly centred on music. Riot grrrl bands such as Fifth Column, Bikini Kill, Bratmobile, Heavens to Betsy, The Third Sex, Sleater-Kinney and queercore bands such as Team Dresch addressed an array of feminist issues, for instance rape, domestic abuse, sexuality and female empowerment. In addition to maintaining a music scene, riot grrrl was also a subculture that became the flag-bearer of a new type of DIY feminism. Since 2000, over two hundred Ladyfest events have taken place, spanning North and South America, Europe, Asia and Australasia. The majority of local organizing teams have adopted the organizational structure and the DIY politics of the first Ladyfest: they are non-profit orientated, self-organized and self-financed. These festivals are organized by volunteers and the program of each festival edi-

¹²⁷ Passerini, 2007, 294.

¹²⁸ Passerini, 2007, 295.

¹²⁹ Passerini, 2007, 299.

¹³⁰ Chidgey, Reitsamer & Zobl, 2009, 6.

tion is agreed upon by the organizing collective. They advocate a variety of artistic and political forms of expression (workshops, dance parties, concerts, exhibitions, film screenings, discussions, and participatory activities), often deliberately refusing to separate art from politics. As such, they are “a popular vehicle for young feminists and their peers to agitate, celebrate and inform, with proceeds donated to women’s causes and groups”.¹³¹

It is interesting to note that the organizers of the first Ladyfest and the organizers of the first Red Dawns were not aware of each other’s existence, and were not necessarily inspired by the same ideas, yet the outcomes of their efforts have been very similar – despite the significant differences in political and social contexts in which they operated. In her review of the tenth Red Dawns, “an aging riot grrrl/Ladyfest veteran” from the UK, Red Chidgey, noticed “many common ideals” shared by Red Dawns and Ladyfests, especially “those emerging from the Women’s Liberation Movement of the 70s and 80s, like creating autonomous spaces which are women-led”.¹³² When describing the differences between today’s generation of feminist organizers and those who were active in the 1980s, she noticed “a much more queer, or gender fluid, understanding of sex roles and embodiments” and the embracing of “a whole host of multi-media technologies, events and performances”.¹³³ She also observed differences between Red Dawns and Ladyfests:

While Ladyfests count their ground zero as emerging from Riot Grrrl, Red Dawns embraces a cross-generational audience and legacy (...); the connection into a bigger movement of social struggle, encapsulated in memory through things like names,

¹³¹ Chidgey, Reitsamer & Zobl, 2009, *ibidem*.

¹³² Chidgey, 2009b.

¹³³ Chidgey, 2009b.

songs, images, and (...) that proud stance of supposedly old-fashioned notions like ‘solidarity’”.¹³⁴

Chidgey added that in contrast to other “third-wave-esque events” such as Ladyfest, the 2009 edition of Red Dawns “had all the fun and festiness of other queer-feminist festivals, but with none of the historical amnesia”.¹³⁵ Lidija Radojević commented: “The amnesia in the West is a hundred times bigger. The difference is that here people notice it and are still bothered by it because the cut was so drastic.”

Those Red Dawns organizers who had participated in Ladyfests in Western Europe noticed other similarities and differences. Urška Merc has lived in Amsterdam since 2006. Admitting that her criticism might result from a completely different level of involvement with Red Dawns on one hand and Ladyfest Amsterdam on the other, she claimed that

Red Dawns cannot be compared to Ladyfests even though people circulate between them. That’s because Red Dawns tried to do something that would be more than just a music-based festival (...). I often feel that there is nothing subversive happening at Ladyfests. I’ve been to several and some people were knitting, there were concerts, and that was it.

Tanja Škander, who is based in Berlin and has co-organized both Red Dawns and Lad.i.y.fest Berlin, was less critical about Ladyfests. She did say that while both festivals are interested in networking and “people who have been at Red Dawns now come to Berlin, even though they are from Holland or Croatia or Serbia”, she felt that at Red Dawns, “the people who already knew each other were more

¹³⁴ Chidgey, 2009b.

¹³⁵ Chidgey, 2009b.

willing to include newcomers in their network, to expand it". In addition, she noticed a difference in the quality of "relationships, debating culture and the level of fun you have during the organization process" which – for her – was more pleasurable at Red Dawns. When I commented that the festival preparations in Ljubljana did not include many conflicts, and that if that were the case, our "debating culture" might turn out to be disastrous, Tanja said that I might be right, yet in Ljubljana "the clash was never so strong that it would (...) actually stop us from organizing an event" just because we could not agree on a consensus.

These particular observations cannot be generalized. I mention them in order to point out the difficulty of comparing similar events, which are set in different subcultural, cultural and political contexts. In this sense, the comparison with DIY festivals from the region of former Yugoslavia would have been more appropriate. As mentioned, I refrained from doing so because I lacked the time and the resources to do it properly.

ACC Metelkova Mesto as a Counterpublic Space

In this chapter, I am going to look at seventeen years of struggle for ACC Metelkova mesto from the perspective of feminists' involvement in the process of transformation of former military barracks on Metelkova Street in Ljubljana to an autonomous cultural centre. The participation in the Network for Metelkova (1990-96) was crucial for women activists who founded Red Dawns since the network viewed non-institutional artistic production and dissemination as a relevant form of political activism – and managed to create a large and collectively run autonomous space for independent artistic and political initiatives that exists to this day. Cultural activism is especially significant in settings where an institutionalised understanding of politics – and public sphere as the site of political

participation – excludes certain issues as personal, apolitical or insignificant. With “cultural activism”, I refer to the whole repertoire of tactics that “provide a context and space for analysis and reflection”.¹³⁶ Chela Sandoval defined tactics as “the moves one makes while engaged with the opposition”.¹³⁷ In her view, they have to be informed by a strategy: “an informing ideology brought to one’s engagement with an oppressor or opposing power”.¹³⁸ For example, some of the tactics that constitute Red Dawns’ repertoire today include manifestoes, performances, the use of visual and social media, music and other girl- and queer-positive expressions, public debates and street actions. The latter have resulted from an increased awareness about the importance of “spatial justice”.¹³⁹

The concept of spatial justice gives spatial visibility to social injustice. It is not a substitute or an alternative for social justice but rather a way of looking at justice from a critical spatial perspective. Spatial justice would involve “the fair and equitable distribution in space of socially valued resources and the opportunities to use them”.¹⁴⁰ Places where this is possible are created and maintained through the “fields of care”¹⁴¹ that result from people’s emotional attachment. In the case of ACC Metelkova mesto, this care is reflected in the activists’ and artists’ cultural activism and aesthetics. It is an emotional bond, visualized in space. There is a boundary that surrounds that bond as well. Metelkova is a limited space, surrounded by a concrete wall. The wall separates the former squat, now autonomous cultural centre, from its gentrified neighbourhood

¹³⁶ Garrison, 2000, 143.

¹³⁷ Sandoval, 1991, 15.

¹³⁸ Sandoval, 1991, *ibidem*.

¹³⁹ Soja, 2009.

¹⁴⁰ Soja, 2009, 32.

¹⁴¹ Tuan, 2001.

(for example, the new Ministry of Culture resides across the street), creating an optical illusion that Metelkova is a world of its own, out of place, out of time, and out of local urban politics. Still, the bond/boundary is strong enough to serve as the base for making political claims in the name of the collective body of activists and artists from Metelkova mesto even though, for most of them, Metelkova is not a point of collective identification. In the dispersed Red Dawns group, only Jadranka Ljubičić and Nataša Serec, members who have been involved in ACC Metelkova mesto from the start (1993), consistently used the expression “mi” as in “we, the people of Metelkova” in their interview responses.

My description of the struggle for spaces in which autonomous groups can work on their own terms further stipulates the politics of spatial justice advocated by the Network for Metelkova (then) and Metelkova’s Forum (today) by tying them to sociological and feminist theories of “free spaces”. According to Francesca Polletta, the term has been applied as a “good metaphor” that has required innovative and genre-stretching definitions of free social spaces. For sociologists interested in the use rather than sole existence of free spaces, the most persistent question is whether free spaces are the precondition or the consequence of political mobilization. Polletta cut the Gordian knot by allowing both options. In her view, free spaces are “small-scale settings within a community or movement that are removed from direct control of dominant groups, are voluntarily participated in, and generate the cultural challenge that precedes or accompanies political mobilization”.¹⁴² In my research, I am interested in the ways in which Red Dawns festival organizers and volunteers today – especially those that do *not* identify as “Metelkovke” – perceive the ways in which Metelkova is being changed by the presence of a feminist-queer initiative that sees it

¹⁴² Polletta, 1999, 1.

both as an arena for the formation of feminist-queer discourse (and tactics) and an arena where that discourse can be tied to the activities of other local counterpublics.

Structuralist approaches stipulate that oppositional culture cannot have mobilizing effects without using and depending on already existing political opportunity. Bratko Bibič's account of the Network for Metelkova's struggle for public space makes a different point, arguing that in this case, the oppositional culture *created* a political opportunity that did not "automatically" follow political transformations of the late 1980s – even if it did rest on an atmosphere of joy and the belief that great innovations were possible after the collapse of the Iron Curtain in 1989. It was in that context that the "real utopia" of the Metelkova barracks conversion acquired the status of a pilot project; part of a comprehensive initiative to demilitarize both the city of Ljubljana and Slovenia. As such, the history of ACC Metelkova mesto suggests that "counterhegemonic ideas and identities come neither from outside the system nor from some free-floating oppositional consciousness, but from long standing community institutions".¹⁴³

In the case of ACC Metelkova mesto, the existence of a counterpublic space was a result of deliberate political mobilization, of tactical political struggle that was inseparable from the "cultural challenge" it presented. Philosopher, musician and composer Bratko Bibič was one of many active members of the Network for Metelkova whose operations united several hundred subjects from the heterogeneous fields of art, culture and socially engaged movements. In *Noise from Metelkova* (2003), he wrote that "artistic and (sub)cultural practices have been one of the pillars (...) and driving force of the ongoing project of the Metelkova army barracks conversion in all the stages of the process".¹⁴⁴ In his view, the artistic

¹⁴³ Polletta, 1999, 1.

¹⁴⁴ Bibič, 2003, 2.

and cultural nature of the alliance was understandable given the fact that their struggle for space, including the lack of working facilities such as art studios, was one of the crucial arenas of the struggle for “real”, not only imaginary or discursive “space for the alternatives”, representing freedom in art, culture, and politics of the 1980s in Ljubljana.

By resorting to destruction and attempting to demolish the buildings on Metelkova (which had by a previous political decision of both the town and state authorities been allocated to the Network for Metelkova), the first postsocialist municipal authorities “opted for a brutal and antagonistic advancement of their narrow/reductive ideological, political and, in terms of real-estate, speculative interests. This also forced the activists to take more radical action”.¹⁴⁵ They squatted, “rebuilt” and used the premises in ways that resisted the authorities’ abuse of power. Metelkova acquired and never quite shook off the reputation of being dangerous, because it has never been under any (in)direct control of the structures of authority and capital, and because it still strives to remain an autonomous field of urban artistic, cultural, social, counterpublic life and production.¹⁴⁶

For Red Dawns, ACC Metelkova mesto is more than a venue; it is the symbolic frame that places the festival into a certain genealogy, the history of many small lesbian, feminist, women’s and queer initiatives that preceded or coexist with it. The women’s groups that took part in the Network for Metelkova and resided in Metelkova since 1993 built on the legacy of new social movements from the

¹⁴⁵ Bibič, 2003, 4.

¹⁴⁶ Today, Metelkova consists of four large buildings which hold around fifty art studios, a graphic studio, galleries, four music venues, practice spaces, a recording studio, cafes, dance clubs, a reading room with radical literature, an anarchist info shop, a public kitchen, a queer cultural centre and a heavy-metal bar.

late 1970s and 1980s. The network intersections within Metelkova mesto were crucial for generating mobilizing identities because they provided weakly tied individuals with the access to previously unavailable ideas. The counterhegemonic nature of these ideas also enabled them to defy social conventions, including gender-based asymmetries. The fight for Metelkova provided the involved activists of both sexes with the network, skills and solidarity that helped them organize around a variety of issues. As can be observed from Jadranka's and Nataša's account, for women activists, Metelkova also provided the space for questioning the gap between their male friends and activists' egalitarian ethos and their sexist behaviour. Generally speaking, Metelkova provided both the physical and conceptual space within which activists were able to penetrate the prevailing common *nonsense* that keeps most people passive in the face of injustice – and is thus still crucial for the formation of identities and interests that precede (and empower) mobilization. The aims and organizing structure of Red Dawns are impossible to understand without this wider frame of reference. Metelkova, as a free space, provided a kind of anchor for the insistence and development of cultural challenges that exploded previously existing structural arrangements of public spaces.

I want to point out another dimension of counterpublic spaces, most often neglected by feminist accounts, which deal with identity construction, deconstruction and reconstruction. Usually, they focus on people's childhoods spent within the nuclear family, rely on psychoanalysis¹⁴⁷ and tend to see identity in ways that obscure its heterogeneity, multiplicity and use. The existence of a feminist-queer genealogy and the fact that some organizers identify with Metelkova as much as they do with the festival, could suggest that identity is also constructed intersubjectively: by choosing to be affil-

¹⁴⁷ Fraser, 1990, 47.

iated with various oppositional artistic/activist collectives and spaces. Chela Sandoval theorized about a “differential mode of consciousness” when she opposed essentialist ideas about identity formation and politics by proposing that the differential mode offers “a strategic politics wherein modernist oppositional identities become tactical poses”.¹⁴⁸ In the same way, the different meanings and values of counterpublic spaces are constantly (re)created and negotiated through their particular use. Phil Hubbard wrote that spaces are “constantly becoming, in process and unavoidably caught up in power relations”.¹⁴⁹ Like recent discussions about subjectivity in feminist philosophy, these debates suggest that the key question might not be what counterpublic spaces (and subjectivities) *are* but what they enable or *do*.

Red Dawns’ Internal and External Function

The final chapter is focused on my interviewees’ reflection on Red Dawns’ internal function and the ways in which it intersects with the festival’s public outreach. When I approached my interviewees in July 2009, I already had a working definition of both functions but I did not want to pose questions that would immediately reveal my theoretical interests and presuppositions. This is why my introductory question addressed the associations and moments most remembered by the interviewees. By far the most frequently received answer referred to sociability as the festival’s highlight. For instance, Tanja Škander spoke of the “incredible atmosphere, the great feeling, interesting people, great conversations”, Lidija Radojević talked about “a kind of carnevalesque feeling in the air; both aggressive and totally transformative (...), a feeling that everything is possible”, and Nataša Serec spoke of “a unique, abnormally

¹⁴⁸ Garrison, 2000, 147.

¹⁴⁹ Hubbard, 2005, 47.

good time” that felt like “another world” because “our energies merged in such a way that everything was heart-felt”.

Other memorable elements of Red Dawns mentioned were: the festival’s “courage in daring to cross the line” (Lidija Radojević), “the intertwining of art and politics” (Urška Merc, Slađana Mitrović, Ana Grobler), “social and political engagement” (Anja Kocman, Danaja Grešak), “increased visibility for lesbians, especially butch women, and trans people in Metelkova” (Anja Kocman, Vesna Vravnik, Suzana Tratnik), “new views on social relations and feminist issues, coming from experience rather than books” (Tanja Škander, Ana Jereb), “brain food” or “ideas for future work” (Ana Jereb) and “the international networking, the transnational character of the festival” (Anja Kocman, Danaja Grešak, Alja Bebar). The interviewees also mentioned specific events (and people) who made a lasting impression.¹⁵⁰ This short review of their answers suggests that the internal function of the festival was indeed fulfilled: Red Dawns managed to create a public space in which it is possible to generate a feminist or/and queer identity, grounded in a consciousness of community and solidarity.

My interviewees frequently associated the positive festive atmosphere with a horizontal, DIY and inclusive organizational policy that was also reflected in Red Dawns’ treatment of its guests. Festival co-organizer and member of Metelkova’s [A] Infoshop Daša Tepina was glad

that the participants are never excluded from the work process.

Red Dawns fest often creates situations in which the guests (...)

¹⁵⁰ For instance, Noha Ramadan’s workshop *Body as the Site of Action* and the collectively planned street action that followed, the 2008 street-renaming action, Liad Kantorowitz’s lecture on representations of social and political taboos in Middle-Eastern pornography, Svetlana Makarovič’s “anti-feminist” festival opening speech, Moon’s and Sacha Wittam’s performance *Easy Jet Set*, etc.

can become involved if they want to. I think it is crucial to include people in the process because that makes the festival homely and warm, and makes it easy to meet new people. (...) That is why people feel good.

Mirjana Frank, who volunteered for the first time during the tenth edition in 2009, added that contrary to professional or larger festivals where artists often leave immediately after their performance, Red Dawns guests stay for several days and in this way get the chance to get involved with the festival and learn about the circumstances in which it operates. Jasmina Jerant, Urška Merc and Lidija Radojević agreed that communication was also easier because most of the guests were accommodated in the organizers' and volunteers' flats, rather than hotels.

Daša and Mirjana spoke of the “easy-going atmosphere” as a consequence of Red Dawns' horizontal organizational structure. According to Mirjana, most festivals always have a part of the audience and part of the organizational team who think they are I-don't-know-who, important. There's always an elite. Here, my feeling was that that isn't the case. I thought that was cool.

In Ana Jereb's opinion, the organizing group nourishes openness and actively seeks new, inexperienced volunteers who “learn by doing”: once they get acquainted with the festival, they are encouraged to take more responsibilities. Contrary to professional and NGO endeavours, Ana “never felt that this is an institution in the sense that once certain rules would be established, we'd have to stick to them even if they would no longer serve any purpose”. It was interesting to notice that volunteers who joined Red Dawns recently could not name reasons for the festival's inclusiveness and egalitar-

ian ethos. In their view, it seemed to come from “thin air” and they took it for granted. Those interviewees who participated in other – both professional and grassroots – organizational teams before joining Red Dawns agreed that this is a rare, if not exceptional, quality. From the perspective of long-time organizers whose responsibilities are significantly larger, these qualities have been reached in the course of years through a demanding process in which innovation was both necessary and actively sought. Nataša Serec said that

we invented our own approaches to design, the process of program selection, team-building, seeking and involving volunteers, and then the international aspect, which is how we now find ourselves connected to an international circle.

Jadranka Ljubičić stipulated the team’s ability to delegate responsibilities without framing the organization process in hierarchical ways. Ana Jereb, who participated in the organizational team sporadically, said that since the festival is “a changing construction, it was sometimes hard to catch up”. Yet, she added, that means that “a lot depends on your own initiative. It’s not like somebody will ‘pull your sleeve’, except when it comes to things that really have to be done and have been previously delegated to you”. Daša Tepina added that even though the festival has been happening for a long time and became fairly known in the process, it deliberately stayed non-profitable, informal and largely based on voluntary work. In her view, voluntary work is the precondition for an inclusive and horizontal structure and “a crucial concept for venues such as Metelkova”. Jasmina Jerant also appreciated the fact that “no one works because of money” but because of a “strong and deep dedication to women’s issues”. She added that “there is a lot of respect among all of the individuals in the team – respect for each other. And also, I would say, a lot of honesty and sincerity”.

In Mirjana Frank's words, Red Dawns' program and size, and its consequent marginality, remains both an advantage and disadvantage. The advantage is that

we – if I can say 'we' – don't give a fuck about pleasing the taste of the masses since the festival program targets a very specific audience; the purpose is not to chase away certain people but to focus on specific interests. Of course, the disadvantage is that the festival's influence is limited. However, others are doing that. We might not be effective but we have a certain depth, recognized by people who are interested in these issues. And they do bring their friends along ...

The negative side of refusing to professionalize the festival is that, as Ana Jereb and Nataša Serec claimed, the organizers inevitably shift from one role to the other, and while the merging of roles (you are part organizer, part member of the audience, sometimes performer or moderator) does not cause conflicts *per se*, it does mean that people who are more experienced inevitably end up being overburdened and lacking time to enjoy the festival. On the other hand, if the festival was professionalized, Ana Jereb said that she would no longer want to collaborate: "it would lose its charm; (...) if you want to separate all functions, you quickly end up having a hierarchical structure". Jadranka sees the value of the festival in its "evolution, which took a direction opposite from the usual development of festivals in Ljubljana". Red Dawns "did not buy into the pretentious wish for megalomania but (...) stayed a pocket-size festival".

Conceptual Openness

I discussed Red Dawns' conceptual openness in the chapter about its history; the many rearticulations of its politics and aims. While this approach rests on a conscious decision, not everybody in the

team agrees about its benefits. Those who do, like Slađana Mitrović, claim that contrary to other feminist art programs that are “often very strict, directed, cast in concrete”, Red Dawns is “open both thematically and politically”. She said that the festival “allows everybody to create their space of action. Sexuality and pornography” – two issues that dominated the 2009 festival program – “are in themselves very controversial and often cause quite a stir even between feminists, yet Red Dawns has shown that this kind of openness is an advantage”. In the same way, Anna Ehrlemark “doesn’t mind that the festival is not perfectly conceptualized”. However, she says,

sometimes it can be difficult to watch something that you think is really really stupid with lots of people around you who know that you are one of the organizers of this event (...) The festival is “me” while the program is “not me”. There are often things that don’t correspond to my... I mean, I don’t have a problem with it...

In this statement, Ehrlemark confirms that the open approach is something she supports even though she finds it troublesome sometimes in terms of personal and artistic taste.

The perceived openness of the festival is also a practical consequence of working on a very limited budget. The organizing team constantly reinvents its fund-raising strategies and relies on an array of sources: public money, private donations, benefit parties and merchandize sales. Having a limited budget also forces the organizers to apply the DIY ethos to a large number of festival activities and replace the lack of funding with skill sharing, knowledge exchange and material exchange of goods with their counterpublic allies. All these practices increase the participatory and egalitarian feeling within the team. Another consequence of operating on a low budget is that people within the organizational team fluctuate

and the program depends on the aesthetic and political preferences of each year's collective. For Ana Jereb, this is an advantage:

If you leave, you open space for somebody else. I really like this because this is how the festival can keep up with political changes and keep itself from closing into a type of group that 'knows how things ought to be done' or 'knows which issues are relevant'.

Ana Jereb addressed an additional advantage of openness when she spoke about the experience of being in the same space with people whose complicated gender identity can reveal a whole new world to you. She said that "you do not even have to talk to them": it is enough to observe and witness their "performance" since it goes beyond any context you knew before meeting them; "they open your horizons, your thoughts". Daša Tepina claimed that Red Dawns is "one of the best festivals in Metelkova" exactly because it creates the opportunity where you can socialize with new and very different people". Of course, the experience of difference can be shocking: there is the standard stereotypical perception of Red Dawns organizers as "lezzies" (her male friends asked Anja Kocman why she bothers to help "them"); the shock Anja herself experienced when she met "a woman with a moustache" for the first time; the discomfort heterosexual male audience members feel at a feminist-queer festival and the patronizing and ridiculing attitude to the organizers and guests that follows; even the discomfort felt by lesbians who usually don't frequent non-lesbian venues – all these examples speak about the local political importance and controversy of Red Dawns as a feminist-queer counterpublic. In fact, they suggest that these conceptually separate functions cannot be separated in practice.

A “Different” Metelkova

So far I have argued that autonomous counterspaces such as ACC Metelkova mesto are necessary for creating local and international feminist-queer network intersections available for generating mobilizing identities. I have also argued that a space which allows “withdrawal or regroupment”¹⁵¹ has to be safe: supportive of feminist, lesbian, trans, boi, butch, queer, gay and other identities of people who visited the festival. This kind of public space makes it possible to meet new people, discuss issues, articulate one’s political position in clearer ways, gain emotional support and inspiration for future work and discuss artistic or political co-operative projects. In my view, this dimension of the festival was – and remains – as important as its issue-specific and publicly visible political, artistic, educational and intellectual production, or, in Fraser’s words, its external function.

I asked my interviewees in what ways their experience of ACC Metelkova mesto changes during the festival. I wanted to see whether they perceived Red Dawns as an event organized primarily for themselves by themselves, or as an event that had the potential to open Metelkova for new collaborations and create a welcoming atmosphere for women, feminists, gender-variant people, sexual minorities and their allies. Most of my interviewees agreed that Metelkova did “feel different” during the festival. Their answers could be divided between those who spoke from an “internal” perspective of involved festival participants and those that tried to look at Red Dawns’ feminist-queer intervention from the “external” perspective of people who normally frequent Metelkova and those clubs based in Metelkova which do not participate in the festival. Urška Merc paid attention to both perspectives. From the outside, Metelkova becomes “more international and it becomes a platform for the exposure to different forms of art”. From the inside,

¹⁵¹ Fraser, 1990: 68.

Red Dawns connects several venues, meaning that it connects several groups and associations. From this point of view, the festival functions as a coalition, as an inclusive initiative, which asks what are the common interests and standpoints of different associations and individuals in Metelkova. I can imagine it also functions as a completely counterproductive force, even a separatist one, when viewed from the perspective of those groups who are there for the profit, who are apolitical or not interested in feminism.

Nataša Serec, whose work place is in Metelkova, said that during the festival she does not communicate with “people of Metelkova”. “Not that I ignore them,” she explains, “its just that I am in our ‘film’ and that is all that matters. I don’t want to hang out with them when all the foreign guests are here and they are soon going to leave”. She continued to say that she is puzzled about the way people in Metelkova perceive the festival since “they never say anything, never comment on it”. She added that she did not even know how people from those clubs, which *do* co-operate with the festival, feel about it.

The festival is limited to specific venues in Metelkova: the lesbian club Monokel, the gay club Tiffany, the galleries Alkatraz and Mizzart, the anarchist infoshop, the Youth Handicapped Deprivileged club, and the clubs Gromka and Menza pri koritu. That leaves out a number of other clubs, run by women, or by collectives of men and women. They are mostly music-orientated and have never expressed an interest in collaborating with Red Dawns. Ana Jereb feels that even the clubs that do co-operate

merely offer the space which could easily be offered to another organizer or an apolitical event. The feeling that we are doing this together because it is important (...), because it’s about ideas

and not only about having a good time, is not there. Even if Red Dawns fest is about what Metelkova is supposed to be about. When I think of the reasons why the festival started, that most of the work was done – and still is done – by women, this lack of interest bothers me. If the festival used to be a Metelkova festival, it no longer is.

Within Menza pri koritu, the main festival venue where Nataša Serec organizes events throughout the year, she does feel the difference:

It's a completely different energy, all of a sudden, all these girls are there, and they hang out with each other. The boys are pushed aside, because for those four or five days, the girls don't find them as interesting [*laughs*]. (...) You feel the difference when this atmosphere is brutally destroyed, like this year [2009], on Friday night at the party, when girls were dancing in the middle of the dance floor and then people who didn't come to the festival started pushing in, people who came because it was Friday night. There were so many of them that the girls were pushed aside. They left for the balcony and the energy changed immediately. After that, it was like it normally is.

Similarly, Anna Ehrlemark claims that there is a difference, that Red Dawns “definitely turns the place upside down for a few days”. She attributes the difference to the fact that there are more lesbians present at venues they normally do not frequent, and to “this core group of the festival that is very supportive of each other, in the mood for dancing with each other, giving each other compliments and talking to each other”. Lidija Radojević began to define “normality” by asking: “If Metelkova is really so liberal and open as we claim it to be, why do you, at the regular parties (...), never see two

women kissing? Why do you see it exclusively during Red Dawns?” In her opinion, the festival is provocative because it points out the fact that alternative places such as Metelkova are tied into the dominant, sexist and heteronormative culture. “Metelkova is a really chauvinist place,” she said:

All these boys are so paternalistic. Because we are, to speak in quotation marks, their girlfriends, their friends, even these boys cannot step out of their chauvinism which completely dominates our culture at all levels: from the lowest (...) to the highest, academic level. Everyone falls for it, even the alternative scene, Metelkova, including our enlightened, cool friends.

When asked whether the difference she felt during the festival came from the temporary absence of chauvinism, she corrected me and replied:

No, I never said that chauvinism is absent; I said that more women and more feminists are present. Because we are in majority and the themes discussed are feminist. The chauvinism stays the same – it’s in all the jokes that come out after the second beer.

From a lesbian point of view, the festival increases the safety of those clubs in Metelkova, which are not specifically lesbian, gay or queer even though, on a declarative level, they support sexual minorities. Suzana Tratnik said that for her, as a lesbian who would normally frequent Monokel or Tiffany, Red Dawns is an opportunity to visit other venues. The festival has only recently – and deliberately – started to include program items that are interesting for a gay audience. Since the female ensemble of Red Dawns did not feel competent to organize a program *for* gays, it started to co-operate with the program coordinator of Tiffany,

Jernej Škof in 2009, and with journalist and queer film enthusiast Dare Pejić in 2010.

The festival is also an opportunity to discuss feminist and queer issues in public. Most of my interviewees attributed that to the increased presence of foreign guests who are less burdened with local and highly gendered codes of behaviour, who are there because they are interested in networking and feminist-queer politics. Jasmina Jerant and Jadranka Ljubičič paid attention to the local audience and noticed a change in its structure. Jasmina noticed “established Slovenian intellectuals, academics, journalists and even politicians” who “mostly came for the panel discussion and lectures”. Jadranka observed that, in general, the festival manages to create its own audience: artists who are part of the program, activist groups who either help with the festival or come to party, and the people they bring along because they are interested in the program. “That absolutely changes the face of Metelkova,” she says, “since there are less people who come solely because Metelkova is an open space”. Jadranka also noticed a change in the gender structure of the audience, highlighting the presence of “men who recognized a certain quality, and are no longer afraid to come to the festival, even though they know they are going to be in minority”.

The Limitations of Red Dawns

Several interviewees experience the annual festive event as a strategic mistake or limitation since it fails to provide the kind of continuity that is, as they unanimously agreed, necessary for building a counterpublic. Whether they used the paradoxical term “temporary community” (Anna Ehrlemark, Jadranka Ljubičič), the term “crossroad” or “meeting point” (Anja Bebar), “network” (Tanja Škander), “entry point” (Daša Tepina), “scene” (Lidija Radojević) or “organism” (Ana Grobler), none of the terms seemed appropriate since they only

increased the feeling that there is a lack of the kind of feminist-queer counterpublic that would be able to intervene into the official public sphere in effective or visible ways. While Tanja Škander said that “during those three or four days, some sort of community (...), a certain chemistry is created” which should not be underestimated since it makes people who “cross the limits of heteronormativity” feel “less strange” or “relatively normal”, my other interviewees were clearly frustrated by the festivals’ formal boundaries.

Nataša Serec’s estimation of the festival’s potential was perhaps the most realistic since she perceives the wish for continuity and greater impact as a “great goal that might be too ambitious”. In her view, organizing a series of monthly or even weekly events that would gradually build a permanent audience and include new people in the organization process would already be a success. Lidija agreed that

the festival’s mission – and I salute the idea of organizing regular events throughout the year, the idea of continuity – is to work here yet maintain its international connections since Ljubljana, not to mention Slovenia, definitely needs that sort of help.

For Daša, the fact that Red Dawns was more successful in maintaining transnational collaborations than it was in addressing the local community is a paradox that calls for extensive work on a local infrastructure, be it theoretical or action-orientated “in order to be able to react to different types of problems, to join certain initiatives, and become generally more visible in society”. Ana Jereb agrees that the festival has a more international than local character. Because of this, its span is limited to “circles of people who already know each other or share similar backgrounds”. Jadranka added that “both Metelkova and the festival share one basic problem: that continuity is understood as the endurance and insistence of certain

people within it, and not as the passing of knowledge and creative energy to new people”.

Contrary to Jadranka’s statement, new volunteers stipulated the fact that Red Dawns was surprisingly easy to join, suggesting that the festival team pays attention to the participatory chances of each new individual and notices the extent to which they can get involved without hierarchically prescribing their role. “If we look at temporality as the circulation of people and ideas”, Jadranka reflects, then “the term ‘temporary community’ does adequately describe Red Dawns”. In Anna’s view, work for community is rewarding regardless of how “temporary” or “permanent” the community in question is. Slađana added that Red Dawns

continues to play an important role as an explicit point of artistic, political or philosophic identification with feminist or queer perspectives. (...) If you accept this frame of reference, you have to accept the consequences since people are going to associate you with it, and in that sense, I think that continuity is of essential importance. It is a deliberate move away from universality as well as an idea that brought us together. (...) The bottom line is that these alternative spaces are developing strong and critical perspective on society. They are marginal and fabulous.”

In Slađana’s view, the internal and external function of feminist-queer counterpublics is inseparable. Urška Merc, who views the discussion from her distant yet comparable Amsterdam experience, adds that Red Dawns is as effective and visible as other counterpublic arenas since “Ljubljana lacks a wider social community. (...) Whether you consider animal rights groups or workers’ organizations, there is a lack of consciousness that in a wider context, we are all struggling for the same goal”. Similarly, Vesna Vravnik recalls that when she first got involved in “the scene”, she believed

that “marginal groups would be strong enough to beat the majority if they would join hands”. “And yet,” she added, “everyone wants to go their own way and leave their signature”. In this context, Nancy Fraser’s writing on the “absence of any credible overarching emancipatory project despite the proliferation of fronts of struggle” and “a general decoupling of the cultural politics of recognition from the social politics of redistribution”,¹⁵² as features characteristic of the postsocialist condition, most definitely rings a bell.

Conclusion

According to my interviewees, Festive sociability was the most important aspect of Red Dawns’ internal function. It was enabled by the festival’s conceptual openness, by its growing local and international network, and by its horizontal, participatory, and DIY organizational policy. In this way, Red Dawns managed to temporarily blur the distinctions between predefined social roles (audience, participant, organizer) and allowed identification with Red Dawns as a feminist-queer “temporary community” or (potential) counterpublic. The second important aspect of Red Dawns’ internal function was the generation of productive conflicts and discussions, encouraged by the issue-specific festival program and the heterogeneous structure of the audience.

The external function of Red Dawns was directed towards other local counterpublics as well as the official public sphere. The festival has reached both even though my interviewees’ desire for an even greater visibility of feminist and queer issues suggests that the annual festival format needs to be enriched with other forms of public participation which would take place on a more regular basis and possibly step outside Metelkova’s borders. In its eleven years of existence, the festival has successfully contributed to the diver-

¹⁵² Naples, 2004, 1103-4.

sification of counterpublic feminist-queer discourses and to the critique of hegemonic discourse in postsocialist Slovenia. Since the latter has already managed to exclude the majority of population from decision-making processes and reduced politics to a spectacle, emerging counterpublics such as Red Dawns are of key importance for a truly participatory, heterogeneous and just society.

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