

# Lev Kreft

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## Mediterranean and Art World<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

In her book *Terra infirma* Irit Rogoff, introducing Ana Mendieta's death in 1985, said that

both her life and her death have somehow been contained within a very particular geographical location, that of the art world.

The art world as a concept rings a bell: that of Arthur Danto. But where is, geographically, the art world? Irit Rogoff continues:

While the art world cannot claim for itself a fixed and concrete location, a mapped terrain with distinct boundaries, it is nevertheless a world unto itself, with a distinct cultural and linguistic tradition and a vehement sense of territoriality.

There is a world with its geography mapped in one or another distorted way of projection, and there is a world of art which is neither here nor there, but it still has a vehement sense of territoriality. Two worlds and two mappings. How do they relate to each other? Well, Irit Rogoff believes that there is a set of territorial imperatives at work which

continue to privilege a Eurocentric, urban and commodity-oriented artistic culture whose centre it is claimed is the New York art world.

In the art world, we have a mapping which makes Eurocentric, urban and commodity-oriented art great, while others are diminished if necessary to fit the distorted projection pattern of the art world. And, there is a connection between geography and artography, if I am allowed to use this word for artistic mapping. Art world is not just territorialized and mapped, it is geographized. It knows what it prefers and makes great, and what it marginalizes and makes unimportant, of course. Art world is an opinionated community. And it has a geographical place. Its centre is New York. Famous Danto's »atmosphere« and geographical reality of New York, where he discovered this atmosphere on an exhibition of Andy Warhol, are bound together into a lasting relationship: community of taste and opinion and a community of power as well. New York has it, at least for visual arts. To make it even more complicated, as ancient Rome had its »Atticism« as an inclination for Greek culture valued to be better and higher as its Roman copy, this centre of the art world has a special cultural inclination itself, that of Eurocentric artistic culture including its Mediterranean primitive but authentic cradle. What we have here, in just a few sentences, is:

- that the art world is a location where life- and work-stories of artists are wowed and told;
- that the art world has a geography of its own, and its own mapping therefore;
- that geographical and art world's mapping are connected and interrelated;

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<sup>1</sup> This paper, in slightly different form, was presented at 3rd Mediterranean Congress for Aesthetics in Portoroz 2006, published in its Proceedings in English and in journal »Borec« in Slovenian language (No. 644-647/2007).

- that their interrelation goes in many different ways, one of them mapping of power to decide what is in and what is out, and another one of them deciding which geographical part of the world, with its own art world, may produce the rule for the others.

And, with Ana Mendieta, we have an artist who

not only rejected such centrist organising principles but sought to replace them with alternative geographies...

which brings another conclusion

- that artists can adjust to such geographies, or reject them and construct alternative geographies of their own.

## The Invention of the Mediterranean

- Mediterranean as a place of lost greatness is a place where we meet in times of crisis to get new strength from the everlasting source and origin of Western authenticity. Marino Niola has a characterisation of this modern myth of the Mediterranean, originating from the 18th century:

So the South became a metaphor for a temporal threshold of a mythical past that preceded the time when history changed gears and archaeology became the material and symbolic vehicle for this 'invention of the Mediterranean'.

- We could also meet in Mediterranean because this place is a place of **eternal beauty**. Mediterranean can be so beautiful in art, and so recognisable, with its colours and olive orchards, with blue sea and white sailing boats, with terrace and red soil, wine in glasses and fish on the table, white houses and salinas, and breath-taking air's quivering in summer heat. That is natural culture of the Mediterranean.
- And there is another geopolitical artistic image of Mediterranean, that of **divide, borders, margins and cleavages**, including wired fences, anti-trespassing walls and interception corridors, »no-man's« lands, territories of exception, invisible black holes and transitional territories. To speak about this kind of Mediterranean, art is inclined more towards performances, installations, video art, mediated productions, internet art and all other ways of distributing image and message to broader publics without traditional institutional framework. Their place of inclusion is quite often broader civil initiative, movement or group, organised as NGO or as an artistic collective, which in this case represents alternative institutionalisation, instead of exclusively artistic one. If modernism offers an idea of »art without borders«, while it strictly develops nation-states and national arts, this kind of art is literally art on the border itself.

There is a lot of art in Mediterranean, of course, but it seems that these three are the most visible Mediterranean kinds of art. It seems as if the first two are more or less a-political, and the third one is extremely politicised. Such characterisation implies that the political is something alien and external to art, which belongs to its own secluded and autonomous territory. Which, quite the contrary, it is not, and the Mediterranean is not an exception. To explain what I have in mind, we have to visit politics in the Mediterranean.

Think first just about Your journeys here to Slovenia to attend this conference. On one side, we have those coming from the European Union countries. They do not even need passports. On the other side of Mediterranean, things are considerably different. You have to obtain a visa. In this procedure, You meet with considerable scrutiny and precise means of control, especially if You are coming from an Arab country of the Mediterranean South, or any other turbulent part of the world. It seems so natural, perhaps, that it is so, but it was not like that fifteen or twenty years ago when movements were much less controlled, and it was easier to come and to leave as it is now. Even visa can not be enough. All of travellers have to be careful about anti-terrorist measures, including carrying liquids on the plane. Across some borders you will have to cross barefoot and without your belts and watches. You have to answer any questions very carefully, because police and customs officers have more authority than ever, and they have quite exact data on everybody on their computers. If you travel with your family members, you are a potential migrant immediately. What I already mentioned as asymmetric relations between the EU and the Mediterranean South, is now part of visa politics as well. For me or any other EU citizen, the formal procedure to enter any state on the South of Mediterranean is much easier than for its citizens to get permit to visit Slovenia. If I want to go there, I am treated as a tourist until proven differently. If they want to come here, they are treated as migrants or terrorists until proven differently.

This visa system is just one of the effects of unrecognisably changed politics which, years ago, was concentrated on creation of friendly neighbourhood of EU using similar tools as in case of socialist Europe: politics of human rights and democracy, and politics of free flow of goods, investments and people. These two were joined, as usual, by cultural politics of mutual understanding and dialogue built over all differences. During the nineties and up to now, after eleven years of so-called Barcelona process, we have two preoccupations of the EU Mediterranean politics: migration and terrorism. The third is, still, the same cultural politics of mutual understanding and dialogue built over all differences. The function of first two kinds of Mediterranean art is to fulfil what cultural politics demands, or better, to fill in the gap of misunderstanding between two sides of the Mediterranean with elevation of the eternally great and charmingly common. While these two kinds of Mediterranean art and culture certainly prove that Mediterranean is a place of past greatness, and that its nature/culture environment is beautiful, it masks EU politics of struggle against migration and war against terrorism with friendly exchange of polite dialogue between cultures. These kinds of art create a good climate for tourism as well, building Potemkin's villages of fun and entertainment literally: the Mediterranean Amusement Parks. Nothing is wrong with that, of course. Just that these kinds of Mediterranean art are, far from being apolitical, politically very functional.

### **Art's Geo- and Bio-politics**

The third kind of Mediterranean art is consciously political, but it is different from traditional political art as well: not only in Mediterranean, of course.

**Emily Jacir**, born in Betlehem in 1970, well known artist who lives and works in-between Ramallah and New York, exemplifies this kind of art. Her »Ramallah/New York« two-channelled video from 2004, shown at the 51. Venice Biennial of 2005 exhibition »Always a little further« in Arsenale under curatorship of Rosa Martínez, records both locations through their everyday life places of encounter (hairdressers, delis, travel agencies, bars and shops), and examines many oppositions and binarisms as those of familiar interiors and unfamiliar outside, safety of everyday and dangerous history,

intimate community and destructive wars and exiles. It is like a luggage of an in-between existence. What makes it less traditional from political aspect is precisely that threatening indifference put in comparison between Ramallah and New York, where we would expect an allegoric accusation and unsurpassable tension between them. Being a message of Palestinian situation, it suggest how all these passages are fluid, hybrid, and anaesthetic. Sometimes we could not tell which side we watch, and only their fixed position on the left and right channel of this video as their geo-political identification can give us a feeling that we can recognise one as Ramallah and another as New York.

In »**Teatro della cooperativa**«, they produced a piece called »*La nave fantasma*« which was a complete mix of narration styles, from documentary to sarcastic satire, from tragicomedy to political agitation piece, interactive theatre with movies and video and even cartoons. This mixture of narrative styles was used for presentation of Mediterranean event: a small boat that sunk on Christmas of 1996, with people on board, or, better, people transferred from one boat to another. They were illegal migrants, and their guides, in spite of bad sea and weather, decided to complete the transaction already paid for and get rid of migrants because they could not risk to bring them back in Greece (presumably) on the same boat. Italian police was silent about this incident, aware of political crisis and turmoil deaths of illegal migrants can ignite, as in case of Albanians and Lampedusa. If it were not for a persistent journalist, and fishermen who in next years caught, together with fish, a number of human parts, it would all be forgotten. In spite of tragic narration, the tone of the piece was much stronger than deploring sentimentality. It was a story of Mediterranean divide, of North and South, and of new meaning of this sea. Theatre piece was just one of the results; there were research journalism, advocacy actions, lobbying pressures, and scientific project as well. Scientific project, part of *Multiplicity group* work, was an analysis of contemporary Mediterranean human geography. It focused on flows of people through the Mediterranean called »*Solid Sea*«,

a territory ploughed by predetermined routes and insuperable boundaries and subdivided into strictly regulated bands of water. A solid space, crossed at different depths and in different directions by distinct flows of people, goods, information and money.

In Kassel, where Multiplicity group appeared at Documenta 11, there was a discussion on the case of the Ghost Ship, and the new social conditions of the Mediterranean »Liquid Europe and Solid Sea: Towards a New Relation«. Multiplicity group presented itself and their research project »Solid sea« with these words:

Solid sea is an investigation, conceived and co-ordinated by Multiplicity, on the nature of the Mediterranean Sea, on the fluxes that cross it and the identities of the individual that inhabit it. The research collects different case studies and analyses them by means of an index paradigm. Using distinct techniques of observation (from within the context of analysis, using a point of view which allows their comparison), different forms of representation – maps, photographs, videos, narratives – and multiple research formats (interviews, reportages, statistics, shadowings) Solid Sea reveals the identities and trajectories that flow through the Mediterranean.

This kind of elaborated structure and ambitious targeting is no exception. What makes these kind of projects different from various groups from the 1980s, for instance Laibach and Neue Slowenische Kunst, is that they take and represent their job very seriously, without post-socialist/post-modern atmosphere of self-scepticism and self-ironisation, and that their primary orientation point are not artistic institutions. Another case is »**Frontera Sur**«, a project dealing with Ceuta and Melilla, two

Spanish enclaves inside Moroccan territory. For instance, »Europlex«, a video by Ursula Biemann (whom we can find in many other projects of this kind) and Angela Sanders, explores ways of living and presents cartography of the struggle of authorities against possible ways of living in such conditions (smuggling, daily migration for menial service jobs, post-colonial third world industries). It is done again through everyday lives of people, and with ambition to explore and reveal patterns. The main pattern, of course, is in this case a fence around Ceuta, to protect the European Union from this people who are part of the European Union, being part of Spain, but are »dislocated« in time (two hours difference between Spain and Morocco), in space (being in Africa and neither in Europe nor in the EU), in identities (Spanish citizenship reduced to the state of exception, third world identity, Arab culture, a way of living defined by geopolitical position and enclosure). By the way, after the project was done already, they built a third fence around Ceuta, with well known European Union politics that the third world countries of Mediterranean have to prevent migrations, smuggling, trafficking and terrorism admitting EU to do it on their own territory, controlling flows and their police forces as well.

- Again, this collective included artistic, research, advocacy and other kinds of work and engagement.

## Conclusion

We may conclude that, in case of individual artists or groups, we have a new kind of *Gesamtkunstwerk* (universal work of art, as in Wagner; a work of art which offers its public a constitutional principle of their community; or, in technical sense, a combined effect of different arts, different artistic means and various effects of aesthetic function). Originally, however, universal work of art involves one or many different arts and techniques to build the highest aesthetic effect of sublime totality. Here, no totality is constructed – it is already here, present as globality's locality, and sublimation is not the product, strictly speaking, of artistic and aesthetic effects. The relationship between scientific research, policy proposals, lobbying, public relation management, NGO activities, advocacy and art does not offer grounds where aesthetic dimension of art would give them a common context, or aesthetic appeal, or revealing of meta-physical totality. Even more, we cannot speak of co-operation between art and other domains on equal terms and not under the hegemony of the aesthetical, because there are no specific and unsurpassable borders and limitations between art and non-art, science and non-science, politics and non-politics. To study and represent borders, limits, divided identities, closures, cleavages and their shifts, liquid and hybrid substance, a construction surpassing those borders and limitations has to be made, to reveal global geo- and bio-politics – not as a kind of cosmopolitan sublime totality, but a fractal conglomerate of multitude of fragments.

Why do I call it Mediterranean art? Well, there are similar artistic projects everywhere, of course, because globality is producing the same patterns of life anywhere. At the beginnings of discussion on globalisation, together with post-modernist fashionable discourse, there was a lot of talk on post-modern fluent identity and disappearance of the subject. What was shown as new way of life was going on at global scale as individual's global territory (»The world is your playground!«), with recognisable points of security and controllability on any local level (global hotel chains, TV channels, global English as universal means of conversation, global food chains, global sport events...) and local coloration of differences displayed as amusement park, while this global cosmopolites, having

breakfast in New York and dinner in Hong-Kong, really passed his or her time in the virtual reality of computers, mobile phones and other attachments. But, on the other side of such post-modern bourgeois, there are those who were put under control, with a help of multiple and very creative ways of producing enclaves, enclosures, divides, borders, limitations, walls and fences. Under such conditions, every move you make is transgression, and survival itself may serve as a proof of criminalized activity, because it is not possible to survive any other way. The Mediterranean is a locality/glocality of these processes, not the only one, of course, but one that belongs to EU and is its product. Here, images of »the cradle of civilisation« and of »the primordial beauty of life« are used as platforms which cover the cellar of divided cells and unburied bodies.

That is why all three kinds of the Mediterranean art are political arts. And, that is why they are Mediterranean, but they are not contained within geographical location of the art-world only. They cross borders in clandestine ways of their own.