Images of Intellectual Nomadism in Works by Katarina Sevič and Zsofia Váradi

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> Exile is a neurosis, an art of paranoia... (D. Ugresič)

> It's great to have roots, as long as you can take them with you. (G. Stein)

> The life of the nomad is the intermezzo...He is a vector of deterritorialization (G. Deleuze)

The family tree is the main motif of *Looking for MySelf, Virtual Family* by Zsofia Váradi. The work contains twenty-one pictures of persons invited to the artist's virtual family. Katarina Sevič, Váradi's friend from the intermedia art department at the Art Academy of Budapest, appears next to Váradi as her older sister. Their physical resemblance and interest in new technologies are not the only things both artists have in common. Explicit in their works is their common interest in questions dealing with the transformative quality of locations and geographies at a time when subjects are no longer bound to one particular place.

Spatial and geographic thinking has recently gained significance invading gallery spaces throughout the world. It has become a useful tool for analysis of the condition of the contemporary subject.

This article seeks to analyze the problems concerning identity, subjectivity, and their representability in geographic terms. I will investigate the problem of positioning the female subject, constructing its subjectivity based on geographical and historical conditions as it is represented in the works of two young artists from Budapest: Katarina Sevič and Zsofia Váradi. In the first part of the article, drawing mostly on writings by Rosi Braidotti and Irit Rogoff, I will explain the theoretical foundations of my analysis. In the second part, I will analyze the works of the two artists and situate them in the context of the geographical discourse within the realm of

visual culture. My aim is to present how these young artists engage in the redefinition of the subject in art and attempt the creation of a particular cultural and social landscape of this new subject.

Citizens of the world, nomads, migrants, and exiles

In 1939 Virginia Woolf wrote: 'As a woman I have no country, as a woman I want no country, as a woman my country is the whole world' (Woolf, 1992, p.313). Although Alice Walker criticized Woolf for building this statement on a privileged position in respect to both race and class, today Woolf's statement can be read as a prognostication of contemporary problems related with the questions of belonging and national identity – questions reappearing in writings by Homi Bhabha, Edward Said and other post-colonial thinkers. This article will primarily build upon Rosi Braidotti's theory which introduces post-colonial thinking into feminist theory and provides movable foundations for a post-humanist view of subjectivity.

In the interpretation of Rosi Braidotti, Woolf's statement introduces the theme of exile as paradigmatic of the female condition (Braidotti, 1994, p21). All women are equal in being country-less, home-less. According to Braidotti, our collective identity as a gender rests on the lowest common denominator among us, on our not having a national tie. Braidotti's influential work *Nomadic Subjects* (1994) traces an intellectual itinerary, reflects the existential situation of a multicultural individual – a migrant who turned nomad. Braidotti rejects the idea of being a 'citizen of the world' as an extremely evasive tactic (Braidotti, 1994, p.21), and introduces the notion of nomadic identity. Braidotti builds her definition of the nomad in opposition to exile and migrant. She conceptualizes nomadic consciousness as a primarily epistemological position and stresses the difficulty of defining it: 's/he is usually beyond classification, a sort of classless unit.' (Braidotti, 1994, p.22).

A nomad does not suggest homelessness or compulsive displacement. It is rather a figuration for the kind of subject who has relinquished all idea, desire, or nostalgia for fixity (Braidotti, 1994, p.22). In Braidotti's definition a 'nomadic subject' is a myth, a political fiction, that allows one 'to think through and move across established categories and levels of experience: blurring boundaries without burning bridges' (Braidotti, 1994, p.4). As an intellectual style, nomadism consists not so much in being homeless, as in being capable of recreating your home everywhere. The nomad carries her/his essential belongings with her/him wherever s/he goes and can recreate a home base everywhere (Braidotti, 1994, p.16).

Geographies of Visual Culture

Irit Rogoff moves considerations of (dis)location of subject to the field of visual culture. The main goal of her book *Terra Infirma – Geography's Visual Culture* (2000) is to set up links between dislocation of subjects, the disruption of collective narratives and of languages of signification in the field of visuality. Rogoff's book attempts articulation of specific intellectual and cultural discourses that reflect those states that Homi Bhabha names 'inbetweenness' (Bhabha, 1994, p.38), and Edward Said describes as never being 'of' anything (Said, 1999, p.14).

Her point of departure is the belief that our times suffer from the general crisis of the ability to represent any form of stable geographic knowledge as a set of guidelines regarding identity, belonging and rights. She argues that geography understood as a set of assumptions regarding belonging and rights has clearly been masking a great many fundamental shifts in identity formation. Through the analysis of the impact that historical events have on navigational principles by which such questions were determined in the recent past, Rogoff attempts the introduction of a

new cartography providing a distinct mode of producing and organizing knowledge regarding the relations of natural, social and cultural conditions.

According to Rogoff, issues such as rights and belonging, which determine and shape the conditions of our lives, are bound to be dealt with in political rhetoric. Her concept of geography is meant to provide a platform from which to think about society in a networked, complex and spatially expanded way that includes concepts of boundaries, connectivity, and transgression. Rogoff postulates the conjunction of emergent rhetorics of deterritorialized subjects with the theorization of deterritorialized epistemologies – a historical correlation or mutuality of the current moment, in which one might be able to trace links between subjects' experiences of disruption and a prevailing condition of disrupted knowledge orders (Rogoff, 2000, pp.1-13).

Rogoff proposes the shift from the moralizing discourse of geography and location, in which we are told what ought to be, who has the right to be where and how it ought to be so, to a contingent ethics of geographical emplacements, in which we might jointly puzzle out the perils of the phantasms of belonging as well as the tragedies of not belonging (Rogoff, 2000, p.15). She argues that it is necessary to distinguish between such currently much reviled notions as 'cosmopolitanism' or 'assimilation' and the activity that constitutes the daily texture of our lives as we negotiate the mixed signals and cross-references in a post-colonial, migratory reality (Rogoff, 2000, p.6). Since the power relations inevitably get translated into knowledge systems and disseminated through structures of representation, geography should be recognized to be as much of an epistemic category as gender or race. All three categories share an engagement with belonging which plays out around dichotomies of self and other, and around strategies of 'emplacement' and 'displacement'. Geography is therefore a system of classification, a mode of location, a site of collective national, cultural, linguistic and topographic histories.

Similarly to Braidotti, Rogoff announces the creation of the new category characterized by loss or absence of navigational principles which would make it easier to move on the terra infirma of our reality. In the following section, I will present how works by Katarina Sevič and Zsofia Váradi illustrate a certain discursive shift in the way location and dislocation can be conceptualized and represented today.

Diglossic imagery

One of the last works of Sevič, the video-installation *Easy and Fast Hungarian* (2003) is based on a teach-yourself Hungarian manual. Sevič, who came to Hungary in 1999 from Novi Sad in order to study at the Budapest Academy of Art, used to study from this book herself. Once she became fluent in Hungarian, she realized how outdated the book was. The first edition of the manual came out in 1962, and although it was reissued five times, only one unit was changed: the unit titled 'Factory' became 'The Businessmen'.

The installation consists of a series of five story-boards centering on themes of alienation, and five videos in which she and other foreigners living in Budapest attempt to interact with their new surroundings. The artist shot the actors against a blue screen and superimposed them on images of locations important to foreigners. The first episode shows the artist herself walking in Novi Sad with a friend talking using dialogues from the book. The following scenes, also inspired by the book, were shot in The Keleti Railway Station, where the trains from Serbia arrive, in a medical clinic where all foreigners are required to get their medical examinations, and in the IKEA store, which is one of the first places to be visited by people starting a new life in Hungary. The images convey a clear sense of disconnection, often using humour to reveal the absurdity of dealing with everyday situations in a foreign land. The last part is an episode shot in the Immigration Office. While preparing the installation, Sevič applied for a residence permit. Her struggle with Hungarian bureaucracy ended with only

partial success: she got permission to shoot the film in the office, but her application for residency was rejected.

Dubravka Ugresič wrote that exile is like a nightmare:

> The exile is an immeasurable state described in measurable facts – stamps in one's passport, geographical points, distances, temporary addresses, the experience of various bureaucratic procedures for obtaining visas, money spent who-knows-how-often on buying a new suitcase – but such a description hardly means anything. Exile is the history of things we leave behind, of buying and abandoning hair-driers, cheap little radios, coffee pots... Exile is changing voltages and kilohertz, life with an adaptor...(Ugresič, 1999, p.113).

Each exile is input into one's own biography, traced by trajectories of various airlines and changing voltages. Sevič uses the metaphor of language in order to describe the experience of exile. Her installation describes emigration as a state of permanent diglossia and displacement. Braidotti says that 'the polyglot is a linguistic nomad, a specialist of the treacherous nature of language, of any language' (Braidotti, 1994, p.8). Sevič describes her displaced condition through linguistic metaphor, calling our attention to one more aspect of exile – the expropriation from the realm of one's own mother tongue. In the first episode, showing the artist herself talking Hungarian with her best friend from Novi Sad, she situates herself in transit between the languages, neither here nor there. As the nomadic polyglot, she is capable of some healthy scepticism about steady identities and mother tongues, this existence between languages constitutes a vantage point in deconstructing identity. The polyglot as a nomad between languages banks on the affective level as his/her resting point; s/he knows how to trust traces, and to resist settling into one, sovereign vision of identity. 'The nomad's identity is a map of where s/he has already been; s/he can always reconstruct it *a posteriori*, as a set of steps in an itinerary.' (Braidotti, 1994, p.14)

Mapping the Self

In her triptych installation *Looking for MySelf* (2003), Zsofia Váradi is preoccupied with genealogy. Her works are attempts to justify her presence in a given place and time. In *Looking for MySelf, By Appearance*, the artist chose the black and white pictures of her ancestors, selecting those which had the most similarities to her own appearance. Using Photoshop, she constructed her own portrait without using her own photographs, constructing her face from features of her family members. All portraits she used are put together in a mini booklet, so small that it fits in a pocket. Such a family album can be very useful for a nomad, traveling, moving, changing places of residence.

Another part of the triptych reveals Váradi's concern with her origins, as a person and as a woman. In *Looking for MySelf, By Using a Map*, Váradi marked the birthplaces of her four grandparents (Kołobrzeg-Poland, Kosice-Slovakia, Nyiregháza-Hungary, Budapest-Hungary) on the map of Europe. She realized that both her grandmothers had travelled to the south and had met their husbands at the end of their journey. She marked these two routes with arrows and circled the places of meeting points of her grandparents. Assuming that such a journey to the south by women in her family is a general tendency, she calculated her own imaginary meeting point. She localized the point of her own meeting with the grandfather of her grandchildren by counting the average of the distance and the average of directions of the routes of her grandmothers. In this work, Váradi uses cartography as a signifying practice of both location and identity, a mode of writing through which she uncovers a set of general laws concerning female genealogy.

The last part of the work is *Looking for MySelf, Virtual Family*, in which the artist constructed the family tree of her imaginary family. Her choice of family members was based on physical resemblance and spiritual relationship.There are twenty-one family members, people Váradi met during her travels and in her native Budapest. The symbolic kinship is documented in descriptions of the meetings and transcriptions of

conversations with family members. During the exhibition, the visitors could investigate Váradi's family tree using a computer situated in an average *petit bourgeois* interior, with a small antique chair and table among white walls adorned with enlarged pictures of family members.

Váradi's virtual family is still growing – she underscores the fact that the project is still unfinished. It is interesting that the very same motif of imaginary family can be found in Dubravka Ugresič's book *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* (1999), where Jane, a black American living in Berlin, buys some old German photographs at a Berlin flea-market, has them framed, hangs them on the wall and says: 'These are my great-grandmother and great-grandfather, this is my grandfather, this is my grandmother, those are my parents, and these are my aunts.' (Ugresič, 1999, p.231) Jane is reluctant to realize the colour difference which is the most striking for people being shown this family tree of hers. Her need to create imaginary family, like Váradi's projects, shows all women's attempts to build their subjectivities on the experience of lack or historical trauma.

These projects show a shift in conceptualizing the point of reference as the subject, who is no longer stable, settled and legalized. Nowadays, the mostly male, white subject with a permanent address is replaced by a nomad, a subaltern, a person of colour, a woman, temporarily stationed in a 'transit lounge', equipped with suitcases, dictionaries, maps and travel guides. The examples of works I provided give insight into a system, which is as much a system of representation as a system of navigation. The works by Sevič and Váradi illustrate a geographical shift in the field of visuality. Their artistic production provides evidence of the collapse of dominant historical discourse, and its replacement with a highly gendered geography as a conceptual framework.

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