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Bodies, borders, and law: Tanja Ostojić: Looking for a Husband with a EU Passport

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Bodies, borders, and law: Tanja Ostojić: *Looking for a Husband with a EU Passport*

In this presentation, my focus is upon an extended practice of activist art that was developed over time, and how that might be legible. The selection here of Tanja Ostojić: *Looking for a Husband with a EU Passport* is a very partial one from the thousands of works that could be gathered under the umbrella of feminist activist art. There is no single historical, cultural, and political context giving rise to this broader body of work and to which they contribute. Understanding their particularity and/or developing an adequate critical/theoretical approach, is crucial, for a fuller understanding of the works as feminist activism. My definition of feminist activism is work that is informed by feminist thinking, and which is intended to intervene directly in the lives of people to effect change for the better. While there is no clear line between such intent and the intent to make changes primarily within a representational or aesthetic sphere, Ostoyic's work actively reaches beyond aesthetic concerns in its dynamic interactions with people and legal structures during her process of making and/or in the work's reception.

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I want to start by nodding to the title of this conference, and its ambiguities and slipperinesses. – How Griselda and Roszika Parker exposed the ideological formations of 'masters' and 'master pieces' in their book Old Mistresses; something that Griselda then expanded in what I think is her most important solo-authored work *Differencing the canon*. 'Considering the canon as a mythic structure avoids the distracting arguments over who and what is or is not, or should not be in which canon. […] More than a collection of valued objects/texts or a list of revered masters, [she writes] I define the canon as a discursive formation which constitutes the objects/texts it selects as the products of artists mastery and, thereby, contributes to the legitimation of white masculinity's exclusive identification with creativity and with Culture. To learn about Art,

through the canonical discourse, is to know masculinity as power and meaning, and all three as identical with truth and beauty.' P.9.

She then goes on to identify three feminist positions in relation to the canon. 'Position one: Feminism encounters the canon as a structure of exclusion.' – need to rectify that gaps in historical knowledge. However, 'tradition remains *the* tradition with women in their own special, separated compartments, or added as politically correct supplements.' [p.23] History of Art as a discipline remains unchanged.

'Position two: Feminism encounters the canon as a structure of subordination and domination which marginalises and relativises all women according to their place in the contradictory structures of power – race, gender, class and sexuality'. P.24. valorising practices and particularly practiced by women – ie textiles and ceramics.

'Position three: Feminism encounters the canon as a discursive strategy in the production and reproduction of sexual difference and its complex configurations with gender and related modes of power.' P.26. Which is of course the position that she takes and the position that in my own way I would follow. It allows us to see the canon as 'an enunciation of western masculinity'…. 'This third position no longer operates within art history as an internal contestant or corrective to the discipline. Its purposes are not equity. It does not aim at only more women in the art history books […] (position one). Nor however does it operate outside, or in the margins, valorising the feminine sphere (position two). It implies a shift from the narrowly bounded spaces of art history as a disciplinary formation into an emergent and oppositional signifying space we call the women's movement, which is not a place apart but a movement across the fields of discourse and its institutional bases, across the texts of culture and its psychic powers.' (p.26)

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One particularly notable aspect of much of the visual activism of the last few years (say, since the global financial crisis of 2008) is how much of it is led by women. Not only in the rise of overtly feminist groups like

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Femen which started in Ukraine and France,

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La Barbe in France,

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Pussy Riot in Russia

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Gulabi Gang in India,

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or Sisters Uncut in London, but also crucially

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#blacklivesmatter, which was established in the USA by queer black women.[1]

Much of this recent activist practice, has also been informed by artists;

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and institutions like the Victoria and Albert Museum (to give just one example) has responded with exhibitions like *Disobedient Objects* (2014–15) and by adding a pussy hat from the global women's marches of 2017 to its collection.

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However, the analysis of visual activism has been written mostly by men, mostly white, mostly based in America.

Why is this latter detail crucial, and why do I mention it immediately after raising Griselda's insistence that we understand the discipline of Art History as a series of discourses?

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Sven Lütticken, 'Cultural Revolution: From Punk to the New Provotariat', *New Left Review* n.87, May/June 2014, pp. 115-131

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[1] http://femen.org/about-us/ ; http://labarbelabarbe.org/ ; http://www.sistersuncut.org/ ; http://blacklivesmatter.com/herstory/

just six women among 47 men (or, if footnotes are included, seven women among 57 men):
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W.T.J. Mitchell. ‘Image, Space, Revolution’ in W.T.J. Mitchell, Bernard E. Harcourt, Michael Taussig, *Occupy: Three Essays in Disobedience* (2013), pp. 93-130. Mitchell name-checks 46 men to nine women
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Boris Groys ‘On Art Activism’, in *In the Flow*, pp. 84-116. In this essay he makes reference to 19 men and no women.

What has happened to feminism if such work exploring revolutions in culture and radical thinking can almost forget to include women? What has happened to sexual politics or the analysis of white privilege if discussions of gender and race are potentially to be reduced to the category of ‘micropolitics’? What has happened to radical thinking if it is now acceptable to be so blatantly sexist in print – is feminism ‘so last century’ for the academic left? Above all, has the feminist subject died the at the hand of male authors?[2] Where is the feminist, activist, performative, artist subject?

It is clear that simply adding women has failed; and it is also clear that assuming a separate sphere leaves masculinist critical and curatorial structures intact. Therefore it is urgent to develop theoretical positions that help make legible the activist and interventionist works that women are undertaking.

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[2] I deliberately place the political subject and the gendered author in an antagonistic relationship here.

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In August 2000, in Europe, Serbian artist Tanja Ostojić began her durational artwork *Looking for a Husband with an EU Passport*.

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Some background information is necessary, to understand the fuller implications of this work.

The so-called Yugoslav wars were a series of wars, ethnic conflicts, and uprisings that led to the bloody breakup of the former Yugoslavia between 1991 and 2000: a geographic area that is a little larger than the UK and a little smaller than Italy.

As background information for Serbia's relationship with the European Union, or EU: Serbia began informal negotiations to enter the EU in 2000, as the entity Serbia and Montenegro. In 2003 the EU officially declared that the Balkan states could potentially become members of the EU. Formal negotiations, begun in 2005, were suspended 2006 due to Serbia's lack of plans to arrest the Bosnian Serb General, Ratko Mladić, for war crimes, and its non-co-operation with the International Criminal Tribunal. Negotiations began again in 2007, though Mladić was not arrested until 2011, and finally sentenced to life imprisonment in 2017. Radovan Karadžić his political master was arrested in 2008, and in 2016 found guilty of war crimes, crimes agains humanity, and genocide. Kosovo became independent from Serbia in 2008. The EU gave permission for Serbia to attain candidate status in 2009, and it did so in 2012. It has still not (in 2018) joined the EU.

Looking for a Husband, then, started in the year of Serbia's first informal negotiations to enter the EU, and after 9 years of war and about 140,000 deaths.

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Earlier that year, before starting *Looking for a Husband,* Ostojić had made two works which pre-figure some of the issues raised in the major work. First, *Waiting*

For A Visa was a six hour performance in front of the Austrian Embassy in Belgrade (the capital of Serbia) where she queued, with required documents in hand, from 6.00am to 12.00 noon in the line with the hundreds of other petitioners, to no effect. 'I lined up in the regular queue with hundreds of people, with about twenty pages of documents and guarantee letters, in order to apply for a visa. At noon, the embassy closed, so I shared the destiny of failure with more than a hundred others who were "too late."'
Second, *Illegal Border Crossing* comprised two crossings of the border between Slovenia and Austria – i.e. into the EU, and out again – over a three-day period. Ostojic had been denied a visa to attend an artists' workshop in Austria, and this action was her response. "I directly familiarized myself with border-crossing strategies that migrants have been using for decades. I trespassed across the Slovenian-Austrian border, which at that time was the border of the European Union, and where eight or nine "illegalized beings" were captured per day." [mignolo interview]

Ostojić began what was to become *Looking for a Husband With and EU* Passport as a response to a number of websites where women who were from the war-Balkans states, yet who were unable to gain asylum or EU entry visas, would advertise their willingness to marry, and commit to sexual and domestic relationships with strangers in return for a life in the EU. The women who did this were often highly vulnerable, not only in the situations from which they were trying to flee, but also because such sites were often used as a means of conning the women, and then importing them instead like goods into prostitution and pornography rings, or into virtually slave-labour conditions. Once in the EU, denied papers, and facing potential prosecution both in the EU in their new place of residence and in their home countries, the women are trapped (this is still an on-going situation). Ostojić had seen the websites where the women advertised themselves on these sites, usually dressed in ways that were attractive, sexualized and living up to popular stereotypes of appropriate femininity.

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She produced an advertisement, a photograph of herself, taken with a harsh flashlight. She stands naked, viewed from the thighs upwards, with a neutral expression, and with all of her body and head hair shaved. Up the right hand side of the photograph she placed the text ‘Looking for a husband with a EU passport.’ The image was posted online, with the accompanying text 'Please send your applications to <hottanja@hotmail.com>. Do not hesitate to contact me with any further questions or details.' Resulting from this, Ostojić exchanged emails with over 500 people, mainly men, mainly from Europe but also from the USA and Australia.

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Many commented on her stark appearance -– for example: ‘To make more convincing “looking”, perhaps you should put on an inviting smile, and some “womanish” hair - otherwise, it looks more like evidence from woman's prison files... However, maybe since Liliana Cavali's film The Night Porter (1974), [with Charlotte Rampling and Dirk Bogarde] the sexual preferences of man with American and EU passport moved toward the image of concentration camp inmates... so perhaps you had in mind the possible shift...Otherwise, nice looking body...’ [3] Ostojić eventually had a six-month correspondence with German artist Klemens Golf.

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Making it clear that this was part of an art project, that no romance or sex would be involved they met on 28th November 2001 as a 60-minute web-streamed performance that took place in front of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade.

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On 8th January 2002 Ostojić and Golf signed and agreement that their lives and possessions would remain separate and distinct, and that either would be free to

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[3] http://www.scca.org.mk/capital/projects/tanja/l_dusan.asp

divorce the other whenever they wished.[4] The following day, on 9th January 2002 Ostojić and Golf married in the Serbian capital Belgrade in a private ceremony witnessed by two other people only: as an artwork in the medium of law.[5]
With her marriage certificate, Ostojić then applied for a visa. At first she was refused permission to live and work in Germany, but after an eight-week wait she was granted a single-entry, three-month visa. After sending a number of letters to different art organisations seeking opportunities for her work, and following a language course, she eventually gained entry to Germany for three years.

After her three-year visa expired, she was still not granted a permanent residence visa, but only another temporary one, this time for just two years, after which she was refused permission to live in Germany. Ostojić and Golf legally divorced, celebrating the event as a further artwork, *Divorce Party*, at the *Integration Project Office* exhibition in Berlin, 1st July 2005.[6]

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In the 1980s, Lucy Lippard made a distinction between activist art and political art. In her catalogue essay for the exhibition she curated in London, *Issue: Social Strategies by Women Artists* (1980), and citing Griselda Pollock's 1979 call for an exhibition 'conceived and structured as a sustained political intervention,' Lippard indicates that the work in *Issue* is activist. She states: 'the contributions of feminist art to the full panorama of social-change art and the ways in which a politicized or topical art approaches, overlaps and diverges from the various notions of a feminist art are crucial to its further development. […] The

[4] Tanja Ostojić, 'Crossing Borders: Development of Different Artistic Strategies', in Marina Gržinić and Tanja Ostojić (eds), *Integration Impossible? The Politics of Migration in the Artwork of Tanja Ostojić* (Berlin: Argobooks 2009), pp.161-170, p.163
[5] Tanja Ostojić, 'Mission Statement', http://www.van.at/see/tanja/
[6] For information about these and other related works, see Tanja Ostojic and Marina Gržinić (eds) *Integration Impossible? The Politics of Migration in the Artwork of Tanja Ostojić* (Berlin: argobooks, 2009).

transformation of society, at the heart of both feminism and socialism, will not take place until feminist strategies are acknowledged and fully integrated into the struggle.'[7]

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Four years later she further refined this: 'Although "political" and "activist" artists are often the same people, "political" art tends to be socially *concerned* and "activist" art tends to be socially *involved* – not a value judgment so much as a personal choice. The former's work is a commentary or analysis, while the latter's art works *within* its context, *with* its audience.'[8] This for me gets to the heart of what feminist practices of art are: political intent, enacted with differing methods.

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This is probably a good time to pause and consider the term 'feminist art'. This is frequently understood as being a compound noun, and has often been used as such since it first emerged in the 1970s. However, this is highly problematic if it takes its place within the broader artworld typologies. For example, critic Rosalyn Deutsche stated, in 2001, that she 'avoid[s] the term "political art": precisely because it asserts that other art […] is not political. […] Similarly, the term "feminist art" insinuates that art itself is free of sexual politics'.[9] While I would tend

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[7] Lucy Lippard, 'Issue and Tabu', in *Issue: Social Strategies by Women Artists* (London: ICA, 1980), u.p. Lucy Lippard, "Issue and Tabu," in *Issue: Social Strategies by Women Artists* (London: ICA, 1980).

[8] Lucy Lippard, 'Trojan Horses: Activist Art and Politics at Play in Brian Wallis (ed.), *Art After Modernism: Re-thinking Representation* (New York: New Museum, 1984), p.349. Original emphases. Lucy Lippard, "Trojan Horses: Activist Art and Politics at Play," in *Art After Modernism: Re-thinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: New Museum, 1984). P.349 Lucy Lippard, 'Trojan Horses: Activist Art and Politics at Play in Brian Wallis (ed.), *Art After Modernism: Re-thinking Representation* (New York: New Museum, 1984), p.349. Original emphases.

[9] Rosalyn Deutsche, in Chantal Mouffe, Rosalyn Deutsche, Brandon W. Joseph and Thomas Keenan, 'Every Form of Art Has a Political Dimension', *Grey Room* no. 2 (Winter 2001), pp 98-125; p. 100.

to agree with Deutsche's first proposition, that all art can be located in what we call 'the political', I can only agree with her second proposition if she is using the term Feminist Art in its problematic sense as a compound noun, but I cannot agree with her second proposition, if the word 'feminist' is understood as a modifier of the noun 'art'. Where the problem comes is that, unlike most categorisations of art, the term 'feminist art' does not indicate style, media, geographic location and/geography or chronology: it has to resist such reductiveness because instead, it indicates the meeting of a set of politics – feminism and feminist thinking – with the practices of art and the art world. So if we discuss feminist art we are talking about critiques or analyses from a particular political position – art made from a feminist position and informed by feminist thinking. Feminist Art – as a compound noun – would indeed tidily categorise, even periodise itself; while 'feminist art' – as art informed by feminist thought – would maintain that nothing is beyond its purview, and therefore that no art is free of sexual politics.

Why is this crucial when we talk about art from what we might now call 'the former east'? The experience of feminism was very different from the anglophone histories that have evolved, and in particular from the American campus-based white women's movement – the movement that is dominant in publishing and therefore in determining terminologies. The terms, contexts, and issues, pertaining to work from the 'former east' that feminist critics in what we might call the 'former west' might now want to include as 'feminist' were very different too. How, for example, are we to understand work by an artist like Natalia LL, which is now included in the Austrian-based Sammlung-Verbund collection of the feminist avant-garde work of the 1970s? On the wall in the gallery, such works appears on the surface to fit seamlessly with works by Hanne Wilke, Adrian Piper, Renate Bertlemann, and Penny Slinger, but came from such a different environment where sex equality was in theory existent, abortion and education and child care rights that western feminists campaigned for existed – but formations of femininity, particularly in relation to mythic mother figures, were hugely

problematic. What is remarkable is that such artists did not have access to work by feminists of the west – and equally, we did not have access to work by them. It is not a question of am originary myth, with influence travelling from the USA to the UK then to points east; but rather of distinct aesthetic and political contexts coming together with technical ability to produce work that needs to be understood as emerging from a distinct set of discourses.

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Detuche's use and definition of 'the political' adheres to the word's etymology: from the Greek 'polis', the city-state. As Hannah Arendt stated, the The Greeks' organization of the city-state gave rise to 'the political' – communities that, Arendt says, were 'founded for the express purpose of serving the free – those who were neither slaves, subject to coercion by others, nor laborers, driven and urged on by the necessities of life.' This place of the political, of freedom, she calls a 'space of appearances'. Then Arendt lays down the premise that many on the left later embraced: 'Whatever occurs in this space of appearances is political by definition, even when it is not a direct product of action. What remains outside it, such as the great feats of barbarian empires, may be impressive and note-worthy, but it is not political, strictly speaking.'[10] Further, freedom, for the polis, is freedom to act in conversation with virtuosity, to be in dialogue; while the polis pertains to a minority of the population of the time, and those who are not of the polis are not free, the space of appearances is a place of dialogue as equals.

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[10] Hannah Arendt, 'What is Freedom?' in *Between Past and Future: Six Exercises in Political Thought* (London: Faber and Faber, 1960) pp.143-171, p.154-155. It is crucial to remember that Arendt was a German-Jewish intellectual, writing the essays in this book 10-15 years after the end of WW2

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In the wider theoretical work I am doing on this I draw upon Lippard, Arendt, and Chantal Mouffe and others, and I will attempt to summarise this, There is a concept of *the political*, created from and as a result of being in a community of free people –

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the *space of appearances* constituted by the many. In this realm, all appearances contribute to the discourse that determines the nature of the community, its identity, and identifications within it.

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It is ordered and maintained structurally by *politics*.

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All of this is contingent upon a notion of *freedom*. Those people who are part of that community can choose to act in it, intervening to shift or maintain the consensus of what constitutes that community.

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It is a *discourse-based* community that needs virtuosity of performance (for persuasiveness?) as it depends upon appearance, and action, for its maintenance.

Yet 'discourse' suggests more than a passive audience for performance, but the action of engagement: bearing witness. Thus, there is interdependence of freedom, community, structure, discourse, action, and virtuosity.

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Art works and performances take part in the realm of the political.

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Artists are in a place of tension between being, on the one hand, outside the community to make work (the *demi-monde*, bohemia, and similar romantic concepts of the 'otherness' of the artist come to mind), and on the other hand,

being increasingly determined by the discourses of the community itself to be performative subjects. – we can think of the growth of critical theory around gender and "performativity" in the late 1980s and 1990s.[11]

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If freedom is the direct aim of political action in times of revolution, as Arendt states, then we can begin to understand those who identify as women as also constantly caught between two modes of being.

Ostensibly part of the realm of the political, nonetheless in democratic states women have had to undertake what Juliet Mitchell called 'the longest revolution'[12] to be part of political life and to be part of the structures of politics; yet when they attain that status they (we) have found that they are still forced to speak from elsewhere, that our actions in the realm of appearances are still not counted as equal, and indeed, that we do not appear in equitable numbers.

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This is not only a problem for those who identify as women, but for anyone who is other to the community that has defined 'freedom'.

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This analysis can help us build upon Lippard's distinction between political artists (socially concerned; whose artwork produces commentary or analysis) and activist artists (socially involved; whose artwork includes active involvement and intervention with the work's context, witnesses, and participants). She is refining a difference between artists who address politics within the terms of the artworld,

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[11] While noting Butler's huge importance, I have focused upon Kaprow here because of his synchronicity with Arendt, and his grounding in the world of art.

[12] Juliet Mitchell, 'Women: The Longest Revolution', *New Left Review*, n.40, Dec. 1966, pp.11-37.

and artists who address politics and intend to have impact beyond the artworld (what she calls activism).

This is of course a very slippery categorization; and indeed Lippard herself indicates that individual artists engage with both areas of practice.

How can we begin to understand the activism of these works by Ostojić, their interventions and effectiveness, using the framework I have described? My argument here is that Ostoyic is both a political and an activist artist in this body of work. She is an artist who insists on intervening in the polis, into the space of appearances, and once there, into the political (the relationships of discourse between people that constitute the Polis) and into politics (the regulatory and legal structures that keep the polis in order).

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Looking for a Husband with a EU Passport and the related works, can be understood as exemplars of activist feminist practices in the first decade of this century: Her work deals with the consequences of having a body that is sexed female in relation to being a citizen confronted with the supposedly gender-neutral edifices of behaviour, law and governance. It is the experience of many women that those structures are not neutral (ie not dispassionate about difference) but rather they are gender-blind: they cannot see the experience of being female, and therefore have structures that place women's rights as citizens in a default position of struggle to achieve dispassionate treatment. Ostojić inserts her body into the position of the women whose refugee experience she is

representing – making it visible, and placing it into discourse: an experience that by and large has been rendered invisible and silent by international laws.

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Ostojić's work enters directly into politics – the structures that keep the political ordered: definitions of nationality and of identity, the rights of a body to be in a particular place, the meanings of marriage, the law in relation to all of this, and more. Not obviously visible, *Looking for a Husband with EU Passport* nonetheless intervenes in many aspects of the polis, and in so doing exposes the lines between freedom in the political realm, and its opposite in the realm of politics. The personal (marriage, living choices, identity), the private (sexual and emotional realms), and the coercion of the state in relation to these, is exposed. As an art historian and critic Jovana Stokić commented when discussing the work of Croatian, Serbian, and Montenegrin women artists, the "nation's body" turned into an important "idiom" of feminist art investigations of national and ethnic identities. "These women artists are indeed 'self-positioned on borders,' while constructing contemporary feminine identities in their cultures. Thus, exploring art practices at the southern and eastern boundaries of Europe that incorporate experiences of the disintegration of both the former Yugoslavia and the socialist project sheds light on the formation of feminine identities in the processes of fragmentation ('balkanization')."[13]

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[13] Jovana Stokić, Un-doing Monoculture: Women Artists from the "Blind Spot of Europe" – the former Yugoslavia, *ARTMargins*, 10 March, 2006, http://www.artmargins.com/index.php/archive/532-un-doing-monoculture-women-artists-from-the-blind-spot-of-europe-the-former-yugoslavia. See also Ileana Pentilie, Zur einer bestimmten Identität – der Fall Südosteuropa, in: Pavel Liška (ed.), *Grenzgänger*, Regensburg: Kunstforum Ostdeutsche Galerie Regensburg 2006, pp. 36–55. Thanks to Martina Pachmanova for this quote.

While *Looking for a Husband* was underway and she was in Germany, Ostojić also created other, long-term, research and action-based projects. For the *Integration Project Office* she established a temporary office at Project Room Gallery 35 to gather information and research asylum issues. This lead amongst other works to *The Roma Question*, an archive of research gathered during the *Integration Project*. In a video, *Naked Life* (2005), she reads statements about the deportation and forced migration of Roma people from Germany, gathered by the UN Human Rights Committee. Another work, *Dinner Discussion, Berlin* (2003) was just that, a structured discussion over dinner, focused upon the EU's asylum laws. A more visible artwork was *Untitled (After Courbet)* where, placing her own nationless, stateless body in the pose of Courbet's *Origin of the World*, she places sexual politics at the origin of EU determinations around nationality.

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At the heart of the five-year project *Looking for a Husband with an EU Passport* is the deeply ironic feminist aesthetic action (and enactment of the classic example of performative speech), the 'I do' of the wedding ceremony. As Arendt said, 'Truly political activities, […] acting and speaking, cannot be performed at all without the presence of others, without the public, without a space constituted by the many.'[14] Uttered in this instance before the officials and two witnesses, the ceremony a legal space constituted by the polis, the 'I do' determines all else: complicity with the coercive politics of the state(s), the aesthetic actions of the artist(s), national identity, visas, passports, the right of the body to be in a place, living with war, or living away from it. For these reasons, I consider this work to be a mistress-piece of feminist politics.

[14] Arendt, 'The Crisis in Culture', p. 217