

## All one knows

Renata Poljak's work "All one knows" is still in the process of being realized and in this situation of uncertain outcome, in which the interpretative projection of the artist's desire interlocks with the projection of my desire, I try to persuade myself that we are moving over the same terrain. But "All one knows" actually troubles me with the doubt of claiming the opposite – that in the field of ideology, which is especially concerned with the production of meaning and the field of the symbolic, nothing is to be taken for granted.

The video installation "All one knows" consists of two video projections, and what connects them is sound – music made of the edited sounds of steps on a parquet floor comes from two speakers, and through looping occupies the space between the two projections. The first film is a 16 mm film, hand-held, made in Belgrade, on the way from Belgrade to Vukovar, and in Vukovar. The images show the surroundings, panoramas, landscapes and scenes by the road, mostly without people. We never see the protagonists, a man and woman, but in the background we hear their comments and fragments of dialogues, spoken in our universal English, with the occasional sentence in Croatian. The viewer cannot immediately discern who the characters are, what they are talking about and whom they are addressing – we guess that they are fellow travellers talking to each other, but sometimes it seems as if they are referring to a third person, a woman whose experience they are retelling, thus sabotaging the autobiographical character of the "road movie". There are no sounds of the surroundings but only their voices, which echo in the empty, purified space, as if in a vacuum of "truth", unpolluted by the relativity of intersecting perspectives, positions and temporalities, in clear contrast with the spoken content which undermines every possibility for a fixed position and solid story.

Vukovar is a city-symbol whose semantic field oscillates between the extremes of disparate perspectives. It is a multi-ethnic city on the Croatian side of the Danube, a city whose destruction by the Serb army in the autumn of 1991 filled the world media for a while, and those images (the bombarded hospital, the convoys of refugees, the sufferings of civilians...) supported the media campaign which contributed to the international recognition of the Croatian independent state a few months later, in January 1992. It is a city for whose fall those responsible are still being called on today, a city in which multi-ethnicity is once again being tested, and in which the homogeneity of an identity-based

public discourse is being expressed by different political, ethnical and religious symbols. The artist arrives in Vukovar in a roundabout way, from Belgrade, the capital of the ex-state, a topos of political decisions and maneuvers which in the 90s instigated a series of wars in ex-Yugoslavia, a city which in the artist's narration fully fits the hegemonic media image of ethnic and racial stereotypes of aggression and militarism, thus contributing to the national mythology which works its way from the inside and confirms itself on the outside.

The second film is a feature film, made in Zagreb with a video camera according to the artist's script, in a well-to-do apartment in which the story takes place – a heated discussion and argument between a man and woman, a couple. The roles are played by Croatian actors, the language: Croatian. The banality of their argument confirms all the clichés of a heterosexual marriage, spiced with contemporary motifs which reproduce old clichés in new forms of the neo-conservative return to family values, with respect for identity differences and the general gender confusion. Every contextualization takes place only in language; love is expressed in the language of the contemporary Zagreb literary speech permeated with specific urban idioms and their class connotations.

The fact that the film on travel is (mostly) in English, and the film about the argument between a "generic" couple in Croatian, actually confirms what is possible to utter in what language. And in some of her previous works Renata Poljak, by multiplying the languages she uses, suggests that the "truth" of the displaced subject exists only as the experience of a body which is being confirmed in each language anew. The experience of the meeting with Vukovar, to which the artist arrives from Vienna via Belgrade, is possible to bear only in a dislocated way – in Belgrade, and in a language which is foreign, yet understandable to "all" – in English. The "political incorrectness" of her excess is only *possible* in a foreign, "civilized" language, in which it is not reproduction of the clichés of mad nationalism, the delayed fever of ethnical belonging and religious fundamentalism, but its strategic displacement.

The stories could be understood as a parallel of war and love, but not in the sense that has been developed in the semantics of love since the earliest texts of antiquity, but on the level of ideology, as ideological speech which establishes or maintains some social relationship. Love understood not as a feeling, but as a communicative and symbolic code of intimacy and an expression of feelings in modern society as has been developed since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, functions as a "cultural imperative", as an ideological rule. Love finds its fulfilment in a marriage, the marriage being the result of a romantic love, which becomes the only legitimate reason for the choice of partner. This institutionalised

exchange for exalted passion takes place in circumstances in which the independence of sexually-based intimate relationships under the code of love is based on the strict differentiation between personal and non-personal relations, just like the modern bourgeois ideology of democracy is based on the autonomous political sphere, in which people are treated as separate and abstract "equal and free" individuals, isolated from the social matrix, freed from (real) status and other limitations, orderings and responsibilities.

By being established through the abstraction of social relations and by supporting only abstract individuals, the autonomous political sphere decisively influences social relations and "its effect is not the same on both sides of the class line demarcation". In the same vein, the coding of romantic love as an autonomous space of intimacy realized through marriage, a social relation in which an individual can communicate about oneself, "to be just like s/he truly is", in a way in which it is not possible in non-personal relations or in the narrow confines of the system, does not work equally in relation to the questions of gender as a continuing axis of power and domination, and the questions of sexual difference as the ambivalent scene of meaning, fantasy and desire. "Discrimination is but a symptom of a liberal bourgeois society which proclaims itself the society of liberty and equality for all while it none the less prevents the enjoyment of equal rights through structural constraints, economically and socially and psychologically."

The story of the second film is a common point of the ideology of the bourgeois family as both social institution and discursive formation for the production of male and female subjects, just like the first film deals with the common points of nationalistic ideology and its terror of identity-based utterances and identity-based communities, exclusive in their homogeneous dimension. The surprising "encounter" with the ideology of a nation, in Belgrade, on the way to Vukovar, that surrendering to the ideological illusion of national belonging, which is experienced as something unconditional, as something that cannot be cancelled and that forms the rational framework within which it is possible to make decisions and to act, actually registers the traumatic event that happened at the beginning of the 90s, with the dissolution of the state, with the war and with the establishment of a new social order. Only with the repeating of the traumatic event, by its retroactive recoding, is trauma established and integrated into a psychic economy, into a symbolic order. Trauma is never historically effective or fully significant in its initial moments; it is a hole in the symbolic order of its time that is not prepared for it, that cannot receive it, at least not immediately and without structural changes.

Questions of repetition, difference and deferral condition the questions of causality, temporality and narrativity. The viewer is faced with two stories, and in order to see one, s/he must turn his/her back to the other, while still hearing the sound of the first one in the background, and the stories are mutually connected through the sound loop that permutes and perpetuates the sound of steps on a wooden floor, moving without direction, in an endless loop. A direct confrontation would hardly achieve immediate success. The traumatic event, in order for it to be understood or resolved, can only be seen when looked at "askew", with a look imbued by desire that enables the shapeless and meaningless image to acquire a clear shape. The story about the trip to Vukovar, by way of Belgrade, embodies and materializes the excessive disturbance which desire brings into objective reality and in that sense it is not realistic, but points to the Real, which cannot be symbolized; it does not deconstruct the fascinating presence of images and emotions, but recognizes the unbearable presence of the Real. Subjectivity, which is not established once and for all, but is structured as a relay of anticipations and reconstructions of traumatic events, is exposed as a set of multiplied views that attempt to reconstruct the event. The stage of the event is dislocated from Vukovar to Belgrade, where the uncontrolled nationalistic outburst, aggressive and defensive at the same time, compensates in advance for a reaction that might not happen in Vukovar.

In the period of the current ideology of "normalization", which acts in the field of the symbolic and the production of meaning producing consensus and consent, nationalism as a specific mechanism of social cohesion has been replaced by political correctness as dictated by integration processes to the European Union, that promised goal of normalization. But social tensions have not been resolved, only suppressed by a promise of "normalcy" to which the "Western states of late capitalism", as welfare states in which human rights are fully respected, are supposedly close. Normalization today serves to legitimise liberal capitalism and the political system of parliamentary democracy and free market as the only natural and acceptable solution, the optimal norm of political consciousness, and all its traumatic consequences – unemployment, poverty, widening of class differences, degradation of the education system, decrease of social and health security, conservative backlash etc., have not been understood as a regular product and symptom of the liberal-capitalist system, but as mere "side-effects". "All one knows" does not produce a politically correct and highly functional, aesthetic suggestion of non-conflicting transition towards a liberal ideal of equalizing multicultural sociability, and it reacts to the frustrating situation of false dilemmas between the "European way" and "local extremisms" with a gesture that opposes the entrapping

mechanisms of normative coding that create a community in which all voices tend to be absorbed into the homogenous black hole. By situating itself outside of the contemporary scheme and its "political sphere", "All one knows" calls for the imagining of subjectivity established in a community, in a restored space of the "political" in which a new coding of intimacy, love, stands a chance beyond "two ready-made formulas of the pure sexual encounter and the lover's fusion of identities".