

MINIMAL DIFFERENCES

by Denise Carvalho

Difference is “mediated” to the extent that it is subjected to the fourfold root of identity, opposition, analogy and resemblance.

Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, p. 29

As Giorgio Agamben has established, the problem of any singular State is that it defines itself through specific forms of identities, whether general and homogeneous or specific and heterogeneous, but always through some form of identity. The lack of identity is a threat to the State. “What the State cannot tolerate in any way, however, is that the singularities form a community without affirming an identity, that humans co-belong without any representable condition of belonging (even in the form of a simple presupposition).”¹ This idea can very well exemplify the former Eastern Bloc in its co-belonging status of Central Europe. Their various identities are here leveled out by a timely centrality, that which replicates the emblematic centrality of a global economy.

“Central Europe,” the umbrella term favored among formerly “Eastern” European countries, is defined by membership, not geographical position. Although called ‘central’, Poland, Czech Republic, Estonia, Slovenia, Slovakia, et al, remain in the periphery of continental Europe, having within their borders great differences in regard to language, religion, ethnicity, economics, and politics. These differences become ironically ‘minimal’ in light of the new economic demands that enable their survival in the global economy. This catch-22 leaves Central Europeans with little choice but to reflect themselves as stereotypes of ‘otherness’, as virtual realities, an otherness within, like two parallel worlds living together, even though only one is real. Postcolonial societies over the centuries have chosen to inhabit the very stereotypes they hoped to overturn; only by “being” could they eventually subvert their own half-identities, somewhere between the colonizer and the colonized. “Minimal Differences” explores the two sides of this ironic self-definition: one, which has become ‘central’, therefore losing all the privileges of subversion, resistance and rebellion of its previous state of difference and otherness; and the other, still a memory of itself, a self-stereotype humoring itself as a parallel reality, a phantom-limb, itching and hurting, but no longer real.

In Pawel Althamer’s video *Videoclip* (2004), two generations of young Poles from the city of Poznań express their thoughts on growing up in Poland after 1989, revealing contradictions in regard to identity and social expectations. While a younger generation of teens claims “no ego, no identity,” enjoying a superficial nihilism typical of American Hollywood cinema, an older group of teens portrays a more conservative vision of their future, measured by hopes of managing and wishes of belonging. Their divided identity reveals social contradictions inherent in the conditions of centrality of a country that remains somewhat peripheral. Stereotypes are further explored in Katarzyna Kozyra’s video *The Midget Gallery buys artworks*, shown at Basel in 2007. The work focuses on a fictional dwarf gallery that attempts to buy artworks from famous galleries at an art fair. The concept of buying art—while simultaneously *being* art—points to how art has become equivalent to its market. The video also suggests a parallel between art as spectacle and art as commodity, but also references artists as laborers and the lack of local art investors in face of an increasingly richer international market. A fast-art market that sucks

good and bad art stresses isolationist tendencies still present in central Europe, exposing a growing anxiety for contemporary artists, whose art is fated to be engulfed in a trendy and purely commercial market. The question is: what will happen to the meaningful art that was formulated in earlier decades, an art of critical importance, that is still in the process of being discovered?

In an article for "Flash Art" in 2009, the art critic and curator Jakub Banasiak made an analogy between the transitional period in Central Europe (1981–1989) and the economics of contemporary art, stating: "We are in an 'in-between' period, a time when the new has not fully emerged yet and the old still remains alive," exemplified by a growth of contemporary art through the investment of new art venues in Poland, e.g. The Centre of Contemporary Art "Znaki czasu" in Toruń, WRO Art Center in Wrocław and the new space of the Muzeum Sztuki (Museum of Art) in Łódź called "ms²" in 2008, and the Museum of Modern Art (Muzeum Sztuki Nowoczesnej) in Warsaw to be opened in 2015. In contrast, the Polish public (state budget-financed) artistic institutions must subsidize on "salaries ten or more times lower than in the West, excessive red tape, inertia, an archaic management model and financial dependence on local political structures." He adds that despite the vast changes, "a work culture and customs rooted in the former system remain alive and well in Polish public institutions" in which "curatorial clichés reign supreme." After artists have succeeded and settled in the art world, "the structures of Polish art are only participating in their success, not having any by themselves." Banasiak stresses that new global contexts in contemporary art are a given to young artists that have the option of making and marketing their work globally, in stark contrast to emerging artists from the 1960s and '70s, who had to gradually transform the market locally.²

Marek Wasilewski's video *Defiance* (2009) addresses how stereotypes can quickly transform into stigma and violence. The video shows a 2005 march commemorating the equal rights of gays, lesbians, and national minorities in Poznań being abruptly interrupted by the police, with more than 60 participants sent to jail. Less than a month later, the Regional Administrative Court ruled that the decision of the Mayor of Poznań to ban the parade was unlawful. Wasilewski's video looks at the march from the point of view of the opposing groups of skinheads and soccer fans throwing stones and eggs on the marchers while singing anti-Semitic lyrics to the melody of "Guantanamo". After replacing the skinheads and football fans in the video with three beautiful cheerleaders, the artist placed the video in the same street where the march took place, examining the viewers' reactions, who show themselves to be complicit with the stereotypes used by the football subculture. Jacques Rancière stresses that the action is the fiction that enables change. "It is through a confrontation between the words uttered here and now about what was and the reality that is materially present and absent in this place."³

Slaven Tolj's video, *Patriot* (2007), documenting the performance of his solo exhibition at Nova Gallery in Zagreb, shows the artist performing a variety of salutes to the sound of the Croatian national hymn. Among these salutes, one can recognize the fascist's, the partisan's, as well as the salutes of the Yugoslav military and that of the Croatian military. As they are gestured continuously and sequentially, their specific differences lose meaning, highlighting instead their shared resemblance. The conjoined resemblance between gestures alludes to the close link between difference and repetition, signifier and signified, leaving the realm of meaning to become pure simulacra, images that are images in themselves, stripped of resemblance, but effectively present in the backdrop of histories. Derrida references the poet Mallarmé stating that the "word", the particles of its decomposition or

of its reinterpretation, without ever being identifiable in their singular presence, finally refer only to their own game, and never really move toward anything else.”⁴

R.E.P. (Revolutionary Experimental Space), the Ukrainian art collective, was formed in 2004 during the Orange Revolution. Initially a laboratory of 20 young artists in residence at the Centre for Contemporary Art at the NaUKMA in Kiev, they began concentrating their collective projects among six artists in 2006. Their earlier performances were more akin to political activism combined with political partisanship. More recently, their works range from performative interferences in social spaces to gallery installations. Their piece *Patriotism* (initiated in 2006) is an alphabet of signs that, like Esperanto, is intended as a universal language. Their vocabulary is an aggregate of a variety of graphic symbols, clearly interfering with media strategies, while creating humorous and subversive messages. By combining different logotypes, their messages can become ambiguously ironic, expanding national clichés across borders. Although they use a technique that harkens back to the age of Soviet propaganda, R.E.P.’s intention is experimental rather than ideological, carrying multiple meanings, that way subverting clichés, and redefining the cultural and language systems. Their vocabulary of signs is organic and connected to everyday actions and situations, directly resulting from the group’s political manifestations in the streets, and at the Kiev market. Using slogans such as “Spirituality for everyone” or “Everyone is an artist,” they reference Joseph Beuys’s famous slogan, thereby emphasizing their own beyond-utopia message, becoming a more interactive and imaginative dialogue with language.

Azorro Supergroup’s video, *Hamlet* (2002), is a performative display of irony of the Shakespearean drama, intended as a critique of art institutions. By responding to the text through chaotic gestures and ramblings, the piece comments inaccessibility of traditional English language, especially to non-native speakers. The video employs an experimental usage of bodies as language, in which the artists attempt to sync their movements to the original soundtrack, as if dubbing the English words with their bodies. It is reminiscent of slapstick comedy, in which self-stereotypes are used as critiques of the status quo. The question of “fitting in” as a validation of acceptance is an ambiguous and complex issue among former Eastern Europeans in regard to established languages and cultural values in Central Europe. The concept of language can vary from general to specific. In its most general term, it can define a people, a nation, i.e. the dialect of a subculture can change a dominant culture and redefine its language. A specific language needs to be learned, so that one can maneuver its realm of subjectivity. Central Europeans now have to find a way to aggregate their diverse cultures and languages so they can be instrumental in designing a common status and identity, while they are still divided through their cultural, economic, and political differences.

Although communism is no longer a threat in Poland, the remnants of communist architecture are still an ironic mnemonic presence. Julita Wójcik’s *The “XXX-lecia PRL (30 Years of The People’s Republic of Poland)” Housing Estate* (2007), is crocheted makettes reminiscent of the Żarnowiec, province Pomorskie, an iconic architectural project which included the nuclear power station along with housing for future workers. And though the power station was never finished because of, among others, the protests related to the Chernobyl incident, the Power Engineering Housing Cooperative developed the housing estate including several apartment blocks from pre-fabricated concrete. They were built to provide accommodation for workers of a future nuclear power station – and, unlike the power station itself, are still existing and inhabited.

The reference to non-existing nuclear power station is especially ironic in light of Poland's recent pact with the US. After joining NATO in 1999 and the EU in 2004, Poland and the US have collaborated on missile defense strategies, which is perceived by Russians as a threat not only to themselves, but also to US/Russia relations. The artist's intention is to speak against communism by recreating these communist architectural icons in crochet form, that way destabilizing their message through a highly feminine, ritualistic, and maneuverable medium, also commenting on feminist language before, during, and after the communist era. But even more poignantly, Wójcik injects this apparently banal expression as a critical comment on historical irony.

Equally 'crafty', Jiří Černický's *Pincushions (daily voodoo)* (2004) suggests how critical messages can hide behind the simplest forms. The installation features a series of small textile objects, constructed using a patchwork technique immediately associated with craft or objects of ritual, such as voodoo dolls. Funny and stereotypical, they dismiss their fetishistic quality by masquerading as everyday tropes: the Ukrainian beggar woman kneeling in the street, a father hurrying to work, briefcase in hand, a mother washing clothes, ironing or cooking a dinner, a neighbour pissing in a bush nearby or reclining with a beer and watching TV, a neighbour repairing a broken car, etc. These banal scenes represent the everyday actions of a person, yet they are intrinsically connected to economic consumption; they are the stereotypes played out as identities, interdependent with the process of consumption. They are the marks stamped on the commodity fetish.

Anna Molska's black & white video, *Tanagram* (2006–2007), shows a couple of young men moving large geometric pieces of a dissection puzzle around a minimalist white room. As in the Chinese board game, which the title alludes to, the puzzle has seven parts, and players are asked to arrange them forming seven distinct shapes. The puzzle also references mathematical functions in didactic systems, concealing the effort of learning through the fun aspects of game-playing. Molska's video also comments on her travels to Ohio and the effects of culture on art making. Mixed messages seem to come across Molska's use of constructivist ideologies, articulated through an American perspective of art history. The opposing effect of the black geometric pieces of the puzzle against a minimal white space ironically references suprematist purity through Malevich's *Black Square*, while the soundtrack, comprised of Russian folk music and a song from the Red Army Choir, mocks constructivist and Soviet-era ideals. The young performers, with fit bodies dressed in sexy-geometric warrior costumes, are mostly beautiful objects of sight, especially in contrast to their chopped and incoherent dialogue. The performers' physical selves versus their dialogue allude to the artificiality and banality of contemporary culture in contrast to the ideological messages of constructivism. In both Wójcik and Molska, art seems to mix ideologies with trivial, everyday activities, perhaps as kind of nostalgia for the meaningful meaninglessness that was both operative and deviant in the communist era. In many ways, this is what Central European contemporary art has maintained: a meaningful meaninglessness that detours from the norm.

With Vesna Bukovec's video and interactive piece, *Contemporary Art for Parents* (2002), this idea of meaningful meaningless is turned on its feet, as art becomes as meaningful as a new ideology that needs to be learned by parents and people of earlier generations. In Bukovec's work, she is the narrator, the interrogator, and the ruler. She creates the laws of either understanding or misunderstanding art. Bukovec applies a didactic method in which misunderstanding art is the most effective way to actually understand it. It is also interesting to consider how the communication of contemporary art is its most valuable tool to sustain language autonomy from an art market

that reduces ideas into desirable objects or marketing strategies. The historical trajectory of Art has gone from being an object of mediation between beauty and function to an object of language, from object to subject matter; it has become an advocate for the dying dialect of the intellect of an elite-turned-margin of the global world. In today's world of consumerist functionality, the subject matter of contemporary art is a dead language, but its object is mostly alive. How to explain to parents and the mainstream lay person that the art object's *concept* is still what drives it into the economic circuit? This is an ongoing task. Vesna Bukovec's work is also about the difficulties in sustaining communication on the most basic levels, here paralleled to the level of the stereotypes in central Europe. The artist tries giving a hands-on explanation to her parents about the most important issues in contemporary art, looking at market, history, institutions, browsing through texts, tasks that prove to be quite difficult. The issue of being didactic, which contemporary art avoids, ironically becomes the main tool for achieving a common ground.

Oskar Dawicki's video, *I am sorry* (2005), first exhibited in his solo show at the Centre for Contemporary Art in Warsaw, shows the artist in tears, apologizing for a shameful and wasted exhibition. The art of apologetics ironically comments on the relationship between the dying object of permanence in contemporary art and the disappointed art institution, especially in relation to viewers and members, who need to be educated to understand this type of art. Another artist working with irony is Martin Zet, and in his performance and video, *Egalité* (2008), a group of randomly selected volunteers, are placed on top of books, chairs, and boxes, so that their eyes are set at the same height, an ironic commentary on the communist idea of equality. According to the artist, having fun during the performance is a necessary condition for its success. Fun and leisure were considered strategies of disruption and were highly suppressed in the communist era. Fun can also be revengeful, destructive, and revolutionary.

Zbigniew Libera's *Final Liberation 1* and *Final Liberation 2* are photographs that were first published in the Polish weekly magazine "Przekrój" in 2003. These works continue with *Positives*, a printed series of staged photographs that replace the original characters and message with an improvised one. In all these works, Libera continues attempting to interfere on issues of trauma, as he states, "we are always dealing with memorized objects, not the objects themselves. I wanted to employ this mechanism of seeing and remembering and touch upon the phenomenon of memory's afterimages. This is how we actually perceive those photographs [*Positives*] – the harmless scenes trigger flashbacks of the brutal originals. I have picked the 'negatives' from my own memory, from among the images I remembered."⁵ The artist subtracts the expected message from his images, replacing it with a synonymous image that cannot be named, becoming an homonym. Since both images have the same names but different definitions, they create a paradox in which the same object belongs and does not belong to a class, and what, according to Alain Badiou, is "subtracted from the authority of language."⁶ In our society of nameable things, whatever cannot be named is itself indiscernible, non-linguistic, and therefore, non-existent. If we cannot erase identities that are inscribed by judgment, or that are singled out because of their threatening message, they remain indefinable. On the other hand, there are many definable identities that have a clear function within the game of politics. They are outsiders, but not out-of-borders, contingent to new inscriptions, floaters of the reshuffling of identities. According to Agamben, the notion of the "outside" means in many European languages "at the doors." As he states, "The *outside* is not another space that resides beyond a determinate space, but rather, it is the passage, the exteriority that gives it access—in a word, it is its face, its

eidos.”⁷ Their face becomes the very identity that displaces them in the contingent reshuffling of organic distributions within geopolitical spaces.

Joanna Malinowska and Christian Tomaszewski challenge ideological spaces through the fiction of a manifold of social imaginings. In *Mother Earth Sister Moon* (2009), they explore how the future was imagined by the Soviet regimes of the former Eastern Bloc, by examining the fashion and style elements of a diverse range of Eastern Bloc phenomena, including the Soviet space program, sci-fi film and literature, and the cults surrounding the mysterious 1908 explosion over the Tunguska River Valley in central Siberia. Here, art subverts ideologies by manipulating their appearance. Ideology is “nothing but the form of appearance, the formal distortion/displacement of non-ideology. ... What makes it ‘ideological’ is its articulation, the way this longing is functionalized as the legitimization of a very specific notion of capitalist exploitation...”⁸

Differences can certainly substantiate polarities, validate clashes, and justify revolutions. A world without differences dissolves into neutrality, succumbs into nihilism. Politics and art create differences by appealing to what Nietzsche calls “necessary destructions.”⁹ The politician both denies and sustains difference, since it is through this duality that history can become strategic in the manipulation and legitimization of power. The artist redefines the meaning of difference by destroying a camouflaged sameness, by unmasking truths. “There is no truth that doesn’t ‘falsify’ established ideas.”¹⁰

Notes:

- ¹ Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, xix, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001.
- ² Jakub Banasiak, “Flash Art” no 267, July – September 2009.
- ³ Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, p. 127, London, New York: Verso, 2009.
- ⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, p. 121, New York, London: Routledge, 1992.
- ⁵ See: <http://www.raster.art.pl/gallery/artists/libera/prace.htm> and http://www.raster.art.pl/gallery/artists/libera/libera_pozytywy.htm (editor’s note).
- ⁶ Alain Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, p. 104, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999.
- ⁷ Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, xvi.
- ⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, p. 184, London, New York: Verso, 2000.
- ⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference & Repetition*, p. 53, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.
- ¹⁰ Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations*, p. 126, New York: Columbia University Press, 1995.