

TRESPASSING: FROM GREAT DIVIDE TO “BALKAN ROUTE”

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Border as the theme of artists in the 90s and early 2000s

Early 2000 was a time when many artists in the territory of ex-Yugoslavia experienced problems traveling due to the visa system. Slovenia joined the EU only in 2004 and Croatia in 2013. Other countries are still outside EU and Schengen. Yet today citizens even from these countries that are outside of EU can travel back and forth, while back in 2000, Serbian artists faced particularly strict border controls, as the country was under international sanctions related to the wars of the 1990s.. Few artists addressed this problem with now-classic works. Among them, Tanja Ostojić with *Searching for the Husband with EU Passport* (2000–2005) and Bosnian Šejla Kamerić with installation *EU/Others* (2000), produced at Ljubljana's edition of Manifesta, may be the most known. While Ostojić's approach was personal and focused on the concept of Eastern European women in general, Kamerić's work was an installation. A bit earlier than both of these projects were produced, today there is no more existing association Apsolutno has produced a site-specific installation.

Association *Apsolutno* (1993-2005) consisted of Zoran Pantelić, Bojana Petrić, Dragan Miletić, and Dragan Rakić, all Serbs, who had, literally, the wrong passport at the time. They produced several artworks referring to the problem of borders. Yet, instead of addressing the problem as personal, Apsolutno had raised the theme to a more general one in the project HUMAN (1996–1999). The project involves planting traffic signs produced at the factory in Sombor. Round traffic signs which bear the inscription "Human" and are positioned in the border zone, approaching the significant divide between East and West, abolished physically yet not mentally after the fall of Berlin wall in 1989, thus highlighting the still persistent political and economic division between capitalist and socialist countries and making that border again visible (Arns 2015, 78). Yellow traffic signs, which typically indicate dangers or warnings, alert drivers to specific hazards or conditions. Commonly they warn there are people or animals that might endanger drivers or workers on the road. When combined with red, these lights indicate warnings related to the status of the alarm, such as a dangerous road, the need to avoid an accident, or temporary hazards. When round, they also indicate alertness regarding temporary conditions, which include obligatory and restrictive signs, such as crossing a train track.

Countries where Apsolutno planted signs was signs was on borders between Italy and Slovenia, Austria and Slovenia, Hungary and Austria, Germany and the Czech Republic, the Czech Republic and Austria, Poland and Germany, and Finland and Russia. At that time, Slovenia, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Poland were not yet EU member states. The expansion happened in 2004, when Apsolutno's project was terminated.

This strict line, between EU and non-EU countries, previously marking the East/West divide on the grand scale as capitalism and socialism, was a discursive project. Apsolutno defined the borderline as a curtain of cognition. While this concept of a curtain had been used to determine differences between the two largest political systems of the XX century, Apsolutno expands the definition onto a cognitive level, determining that the curtain "either tolerates or prevents different forms of communication on various levels." (artist statement). To mark this cognitive point, Apsolutno places a traffic sign "man" or "human" (written in the local language) on no-man's lands, or places between borders, pointing to inequality. It is clear in the local context of the artists' home country that the border represents more than just a line. Or, as Nikolić writes; *The project HUMAN, at the same time, refers to the local situation in Serbia in the 1990's and to the impossibility of moving freely outside the country on account of the sanctions, the visa policy and the centralised control of the EU*" (Nikolić, 2015, 83).

Namely, Serbia was, for the greatest deal of its history, on the other side from the West, and despite that, the border of socialist Yugoslavia has moved the line of the historical European Great

Divide to a newer one, traveling through the heart of Europe, dividing Germany itself in half but also its parts from Poland and Austria from Hungary and Slovenia and determining two territories between different socio-economic systems: capitalism and socialism.

The Great Split

To remind you, the original European divide was in 395, when Theodosius I the Great formalized the division of Eastern and Western Empire dividing it between his two sons, Honorius and Arcadius. The border between their spheres of rule roughly followed the river Drina and a line from the Danube to the Adriatic Sea.. This division was enforced with the one between Catholicism and Orthodox churches in the following century. It was initially based on language disputes, the West using Latin and the East using Greek. The Great Divide (or Schism) in 1054 was a logical consequence, as the Roman Church Pope and Orthodox Church Patriarch had expelled one another. Somewhere around the 15th century, with the Ottoman occupation of Byzantium and the large influence of Venice, the border was mobile for a short time, yet it had become fixed somewhere by 1718. Introducing Linea Mocenigo after the pact in Požarevac, crossing mountains Dinara and Kamešnica, and dividing the coast too, defining the border between the Ottoman Empire and the Venetian Republic. This division, a part of the Western Empire, had fallen into the East. Yet, the Austro-Hungarian Empire had annexed the lost part and had re-established the original Roman line division on the river Drina, leaving Serbia on the other side. The new border roughly approximated the old Roman dividing line near the Drina. In this territory, new national states were formed.

The Serbian state has always been on the “other” side, except for the formation of Military Krajina during the times of war against the Turkish Empire. This formation, Vojna Krajina or Militärgrenze, was established by the Habsburg monarchy. Border officers, both Serbs and Croats, were given the land for free to be a living wall between two empires and also to prevent diseases that were coming from the East. In that realm, quarantines (kontumaci) were formed, in which a person had to await in the isolation, sometimes also being disinfected with incense steam. This was an interzone inspired by the Roman idea of a *terra nullius* between empires, imagined as a buffer inhabited by non-integrated or ‘barbarian’ tribes. Today such a formation does not exist; the EU does not recognize the concept of the land in-between. The space actually belongs to one of the states but is under the Schengen border regime, which defines the line as a field up to 30 km in which border patrols do have interference. Such is, for example, the state of airports (and the reason why camps for illegal migrants are often made there).

Another time Serbia was not on the other side was when socialist Yugoslavia had moved the border between socialism and capitalism with the London Memorandum signed in 1954, establishing the border between Zone A and Zone B as Italy and Yugoslavia, or capitalism and communism, in Trieste. Prior to this division, Trieste was a big interborder zone, or the Free Territory of Trieste, established by the Alliance. Yet soon, with the split of Yugoslavia, it had gotten back to European otherness. Serbia was leading wars to move the original borders; at that time, first in Slovenia, then in Croatia, then Bosnia. During the production of Apsolutno artwork, the active was war against Kosovo and segregation from Montenegro.

“The Game”

Much like today’s war in Ukraine and Iran, these actions of pushing the border had produced a great number of refugees. It is estimated that these wars had displaced about four million people, which, for countries such as Croatia and Bosnia, produced a demographic catastrophe. According to UNHCR data around 2000, roughly half of Bosnia and Herzegovina’s pre-war population had been displaced internally or abroad. While brain drain operations were legally importing the best-educated people in other countries, some exoduses had ended fatally, like the Srebrenica exodus, leading 10-15,000 people through the minefield, ending in mass graves. Similarly, hundreds of thousands left Croatia and Western Bosnia on trucks, according to ICTY. At the time of ethnic displacement, in which each nation went

back to its state, refugees were also leaving individually. The price for leaving the country circulating in the press was 5000-20000 German marks, while passports were about 1000-3000 marks.

Today, the same path through which humans were trafficked in the 90s is known as “Balkan route” (2015-2024), defined as the path from Greece, Northern Macedonia, Albania, Serbia, Bosnia, Croatia, Slovenia, Austria, and Germany, and has allowed about 1.5 million people to trespass borders, according to Frontex (European Border and Coast Guard Agency). However, these numbers are merely estimates, as movements pass beyond the knowledge of countries claiming war crimes of displacement. Migrants are often caught between under-resourced or politically reluctant systems in both the country of origin and the country of arrival. Most of them come from Syria, followed by Afghanistan, and Turks are also taking advantage of this opportunity. There are a significant number of Moroccans, Egyptians, and Sudanese, as well as Bangladeshis and Nepalis. We don’t know who they are sometimes; they hide documents so as to be allowed migration once caught, and they do not ask for visas, but they pay for trespassing much more than migrants in Yugoslavia did; trafficking from Greece to Bulgaria is up to 2000, through Serbia up to 1000, and the main entrance to Croatia, so-called “the game,” is about 1500 euros, according to police reports and journalists. They do not buy passports. Some of them, once caught, decide to stay in the first EU country, using the law of the Dublin Regulation, in which case they often hide their passports, as they cannot claim they are war refugees. Usually, they try numerous times to pass the border in order to be registered deeper in the EU, at least in Ljubljana or Trieste. Sometimes they try up to dozens of times in the action, which is called “The Game.” The game starts in camps near Velika Kladuša and Bihać in Bosnia, where refugees connect with smartphones and exhausted migrants who have walked thousands of kilometers while entering areas monitored by drones and thermovision cameras. Yet not all the borders are monitored systematically, and most of them are not defined with weapons as they were in the '90s, so refugees manage to find holes. Yet, tracked down by cameras and drones as wild animals, they are passing through borders that previously were passed by national groups. Groups. Often, they are beaten up as if the memory of wars and migration had been erased in between.

Borders had changed the placement. Since the 90s, all the countries in which Apsolutno was working had integrated into the EU. Traveling between them is barely controlled. As the border of Fortress Europe had moved, defining new B (East), some other nations were trespassing on the territory. Yet the largest change is in empathy. Looking back to times when war migrations in the ex-Yugoslavian countries were enforced by politics and peaceful displacement, when in most cases refugees were hosted by their own family and friends on the other side, with only a few camps for refugees existing, and were easily integrated, today’s refugees are not cared for.

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