

Last Time When I Googled You, You Looked Different

Flaka Haliti at the National Gallery of Kosovo

By Markus Miessen

At the 2014 edition of *Art Berlin Contemporary* (ABC), Flaka Haliti presented a work, which could not have possibly been more fitting in order to reflect on the current and often ill-defined politics of the art world: “Just Hanging Around” presented a simple floor-to-ceiling curtain. It spicily points at the vital question of what today can be considered the political in the work of an artist?

Flaka Haliti is not interested in the recent debate on the political per se. She avoids and escapes the fashionable. Her credo goes more like: *less political to be more political*. Haliti performs this gesture smartly, being fully aware and understanding the sensitive and complex nature of setting herself apart from a previous, male-dominated generation in Kosovo, which primarily aimed for European integration in the sense of a deep and somewhat ironic longing for the West. Her work neither questions nor does it provoke in a blunt fashion. Rather, she *responds* to provocation and existing realities without an underlying or superimposed ambition to provoke: *less irony – more easy*.

In Haliti’s work, one easily understands that the personal itself becomes the subject of the political. What one can sense between the lines is a pro-active gesture that allows an audience to understand that she is taking the opportunity of the exhibition as a format of public speech in order to demonstrate how female artists are being considered abroad. In the context of Kosovo, it should also be considered as her means to elaborate on and rethink an absent framework of visibility. In a rather subtle way, Haliti demonstrates that the topic of gender is actually much rougher, more complex and more nebulous than usually discussed or portrayed in the art world: a microcosm, which, against all propaganda efforts, is still guarded by alpha-males. Regardless of global geographies, this phenomenon of male control is still hugely apparent. *Who dominates art history? Who dominates the market?*

In the context of Kosovo, the National Gallery is exceptionally important as it presents the only contemporary art institution in the country. Haliti’s return to Prishtina, in many ways, could be understood as the return of the *Prodigal Daughter*. She is treating this invitation and, more generally speaking, situation-at-large in an extremely professional way. Rather than mobilizing personal memory as a form of production, Haliti makes no difference about presenting work in a location, in which her work remained partially invisible until the moment of recent international recognition. One could argue that, in the context of her first institutional solo-show in Kosovo, Haliti’s return is not only important in regard to the recognition that she receiving as a contemporary visual artist, but – more importantly – the recognition, which is being granted towards a woman.

The exhibition at the National Gallery sets out to present a frozen moment of a personal journey. However, it exists as a moment that spans different phases of Haliti’s artistic production, ranging from the immediate reaction against situational realities to the reflective and projective practice, which drives her work today. Although the show should by no means be understood as a form of retrospective or *Werkschau*, it allows for a coherent reading of Haliti’s production to date. Many of Haliti’s works have not been included in the exhibition. As opposed to her recent show at MUMOK in Vienna, the exhibition in Prishtina is devised and conducted as a more personal endeavour, which – of course – is strongly linked to and driven by the geographical context in which it is taking place. Considering her show as a form of “homecoming”, the question arises as to

how one is experiencing such form of return and whether or not such practice can be understood as one, which is based on the notion of exile. Such rendering of reality would be too blunt for Haliti. Rather than making bold, testosterone-driven statements about reality as such, her works unravel the problematic of what it may feel like to be a mere “guest” in the world: the very impossibility to be “international”. While living abroad, her home country has been utilized as a constant sparring partner and feedback loop in regard to her modes of production. Haliti struggles with the thin threshold that describes the problematic whether or not it is possible to approach one’s practice without constantly considering one’s personal background. Rather than a rubber band in which the velocity of pull-back becomes stronger the further you move, she describes her relationship with Kosovo as a form of magnetic movement, an invisible but forceful energy – an energy that affects without touch.

Since the war, there has been distrust in Prishtina against any form of influence from the outside, which would immediately be dismissed as a form of soft colonialism. This development initially started with *too much* trust, celebrating the Americans (and “The West” at large) as the ultimate saviour, who would rapidly establish a national democratic framework leading towards independence. In the context of Europe, as previously pointed out by Boris Groys, it has led to a situation in which European culture are being reduced to and superimposed as some form of Human Rights clause, which supposedly introduces democratic Western values.¹ As Slavoj Žižek and Agon Hamza elude, “there is no secret meaning behind the Kosovo case: its “underdevelopment”, poverty and political problems are not due to some “ancient” force persisting in the present predicament; rather, the actual state of the situation in the country is a result of the twin forces of global capital and neo-imperial plunder.”²

One of Haliti’s works, “Untitled”, a series of upside-down placed concrete pillars, is not only an extremely powerful work in itself, but becomes emphasized and consolidated by the very context in which it appears here in Kosovo. The pillars are modeled after the very concrete structures, which resemble the local presence of the United Nations. Although the work has been shown internationally, it was never shown in Kosovo. In this case, even the work itself can be considered a process of homecoming. At the National Gallery, the installation evokes that the building itself is resting on the concrete pillars as if they were meant to be a form of institutional support. Simultaneously, these objects of militarized security could be read as a wall, which – in a rather confused way – is supposed to block the perspectival panorama, which would potentially open up an unobstructed and coherent view towards the almost comical impression of Haliti’s unlimited sky of clouds, titled “I See a Face. Do You See a Face.”. This could be understood as the ultimate intrusion from the outside: the United Nations not only assuming the role of a body, which has been mandated to secure the geographical borders, but that has administratively infiltrated the very institutional backbone of a country. Haliti is both demilitarizing and deconstructing the use and meaning of those forms.

The most perceptive absurdity and relevance as to Haliti’s biography presents itself in the work titled “Balls”. The work, which presents bull’s testicles, was originally placed in the Muslim Mulliqi award show, the most important contemporary art award in Kosovo, at the National Gallery in 2007. In the context of “Last Time When I Googled You, You Looked

1
Boris Groys, *Art Power*, Cambridge (MA): The MIT Press, 2008.

2
Slavoj Žižek & Agon Hamza, *From Myth to Symptom: the case of Kosovo*, Prishtina: Kolektivi Materializmi Dialektik, 2013, p. 12.

Different“ Haliti’s seminal work is now being re-installed for the first time, seven years after the fact. Arguably, Haliti’s mission seems to be accomplished, that is to say to break the habit of male domination in Kosovo’s contemporary art scene. This situation, in many ways, has been made possible by the relentless efforts of National Gallery’s director Erzen Shkololli, who has emphasized the importance of openness and inclusion.

Within the exhibition’s layout, the *parcour* was designed so that “Balls” imposes itself as the first encounter when entering the space. Simultaneously, it doubles as the final encounter once one is leaving the space of the exhibition, producing a linear experience that has been reversed. It emulates the experience of starting from the beginning. Having accompanied Haliti’s career since her education at the Städelschule in Frankfurt, I have had countless conversations in which the artist stressed the importance of re-evaluation as well as post- and re-contextualization: in her own words, it does not matter how far one walks, one always has to relate to, revisit and re-evaluate one’s own past. What seems obvious at first is actually a subtle, but very nuanced way of reading reality through the goggles of history: by revisiting that, which has passed, understanding one’s own work, the realities of its becoming and the realities of chronological change in a more differentiated way allowing for its complexities to be fully played out.

Whereas “Balls” should be understood as a starting point of a trajectory of Haliti’s practice, “I See a Face. Do You See a Face.” and “I was like you before I got stoned by the fresh air” present astute examples of Haliti’s most recent production. In the context of the exhibition at the National Gallery “I was like you before I got stoned by the fresh air” should be read as a body or identity transformation in reference to the title. It invites the audience to read and experience *the stone* primarily as a speaking subject and not an object. The narrative of the stone is a personal one. Haliti found the physical object in a small river in the Alps during a residency in the Engadine village of Nairs, Switzerland. She randomly picked up the stone inside of an active riverbed and brought it back to her studio. After a few days, institutional members of staff came across the stone and recognized that another artist, who had participated in the residency programme years before, had previously used this very object. The former artist had cracked the stone open, breaking it into pieces in order to be able to record and document the soundscape of the crack. Once the documentation was finished, the artist went to the river to throw the remaining pieces of the stone into the riverbed, where Haliti found it.

Although I would like to force myself to avoid any form of labelling, after all, Haliti could – without doubt – be named both an optimist and a romantic. While some of her work embodies certain amount of cynicism, Haliti is questioning a new era of (romantic and non-romantic) relationships. While avoiding love as an immediate subject, she situates her practice in the challenging margin of leaving things open to interpretation. In an age of precarious work-relationships coupled with the assumption of perpetual mobility, Haliti’s practice should be read as a form of post-internet art, which she understands as a tool that has become the binding force of many contemporary relationships, somewhat materializing the immaterial. In an age of all-encompassing digital existence, “Last Time When I Googled You, You Looked Different” allows for Haliti’s rendering of automated versus outsourced emotions to fully unfold – one, which lies somewhere between truth and reality. Exploring this thin line of the production of contemporary reality, her work interrogates both the illusion and danger of distance – physical, emotional and otherwise. Haliti understands illusion as a projection: a projective practice that attempts to bridge the gap between daily life and that, which is perceived as reality. One can approach it from a distance and make sense (or not) of it by focusing on the very titles, which are placed next to the works. The titles are crucial. Haliti’s work speaks through the titles.

As “Just Hanging Around” at Art Berlin Contemporary could only mobilize itself through the very three words, which would essentially deconstruct everything else at the art fair, her titles make her work. At the end of the day, Haliti’s practice is also about writing titles.