Interview with N. Živković about Still Life
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When you know why you are on the stage, the spectator also knows why

Tonight at 8 p.m. on the premises of the Modern Gallery in Ljubljana the project Via Negativa will celebrate its 10th anniversary with two events: the video installation No One Should Have Seen This and the launch of a monograph. The event will be opened with a dance performance Still Life and tomorrow, on December 15th, at the Old City Powerhouse, a party is scheduled with a concert No One Should Have to Hear This staged by Tomaž Grom and an ensemble selected especially for the occasion. Contributors are: Barbara Kukovec, Barbara Matijević, Boris Kadin, Grega Zorc, Katarina Stegnar, Marko Mandić, Nataša Živković, Sanela Milošević and Uroš Kaurin.

The impetus for our interview with the dancer and actress Nataša Živković is provided by her re-enactment of the dance performance Still Life as the opening event for the retrospective No One Should Have Seen This to mark the 10th anniversary of Via Negativa’s project. After quite some time she will put on the ballet shoes in which she began her artistic journey, which is far from finished. Last time she acted in a performance was in Janez Janša’s Who’s Next?

Why do you think that out of all the Via Negativa projects, it was the performance Still Life that was given the honour to inaugurate this event?

This performance hasn’t in fact had many stagings, partly also because of my long absence. I am happy about this opportunity to do it again (but I couldn’t say that I count this as a particular honour). Why Still Life, I don’t quite know, except to say it is a very ‘clean’ performance. It presents a sketch of a seemingly perfect family with a very orderly petit bourgeois life, at least as it appears from the outside. That something isn’t quite right in this picture, I demonstrate with my little excess which is at the same time a small pleasure of mine. (Excesses are always and everywhere, something that Via Negativa likes to highlight). Many people are bothered precisely by this; why does everything have to be made so explicit, why these „ViaNegativesque“ excesses of stripping, urinating, blood and such similar things. The title of the retrospective itself No One Should Have Seen This foregrounds this excess as Via Negativa’s signature mark.

Your performance is conceptualised as a withdrawal into motionless, partly also inspired by an idea from Slavoj Žižek’s book Violence, in which he comes to the conclusion that now seems to be the time for us to become silent. Is it time for us to be silent?

The performance lends itself to many associations. To a family made up of a man, a wife and a child, which is supposed to be the only normal one. It is a commentary on the outside seemingly orderly life, but in fact every family has its share of problems, as does every relationship. The time when we should keep quiet was meant in the sense of all of us
wanting to say everything, we all want to speak, but in the noise we create we can no longer hear each other. Silence is a possible alternative. I liked what Žižek suggests in his book: that in silence there can be the greatest violence and the clearest answer offered to someone, be it a person or a government. Noise and commotion can sometimes cover up other things.

**Would demonstrations be louder with silence?**

They might have been more effective, but for that we would need everyone's complete solidarity; there would have to be a total blockade on transport, economic transactions, people wouldn't go to work. That would be silence that would convey clearly that we are not going to participate in this system. But there's a catch. Our political leaders aren't competent, true, but the question remains who is to replace them and is it going to be any better then. The problem is systemic in nature. It became clear to me, for instance, when during the protests I walked into a bookshop. There pleasant jazz music was playing, while outside it was resounding with "everyone onto the streets" and this was so strong I myself started shouting, at which point the startled sales woman replied: "I would say, everyone into book shops." This is where the problem lies. If everyone wanted change, she would have closed the bookshop and gone onto the streets. By staying in the bookshop as its employee, scared for her job, she remains part of the system.

**Do we live in still life?**

It seems so, especially when you walk into these beautiful bookshops. (Laughter) That is truly beautiful and smart still life. Not to mention the New Year's decorations in Ljubljana; what good are these lights and decorations for someone who doesn't even have enough for a sandwich? The country is in crisis, but this light still life goes on shining as though nothing at all is amiss.

**Do you go to protests?**

I do, full stop.

**Did your collaboration with Via Negativa transform you as a performer?**

Absolutely. Mostly in the sense, that what you do needs to be given a clear meaning. If you know what you want to say, the spectator will also know. I think I have moved away from forms that are unclear, for example, dance, which had a pronounced aesthetic function and is not so much concerned with conveying a clear message. I have become far more discerning in reading both my own work and the work of others. This doesn't necessarily imply a politically-engaged stance whereby you must comment each and every single thing that goes on. For the spectator it must be "readable" what is going on. So we avoid situations in which people have gone to see a contemporary dance performance and, on coming out, they find themselves thinking how they don't have enough knowledge about dance, since they have not understood what they had just seen. I am convinced that contemporary dance can be presented in a way that makes it more readable, so that even an occasional spectator of dance performances can recognize something in it, of course if that something is there.

**The questioning of the position of the performer vis-à-vis the spectator is also one of Via Negativa's characteristics.**
This question is one of Via Negativa’s main preoccupations: how to open up a channel between the performer and the spectator; how to get rid of the fourth invisible wall that is still often present in the classical theatre – namely when the actors look at the audience it’s as though they are looking into empty space, something that bothers me very much. This is an illusion which is already passé. In its attitude towards the spectator, Via Negative is for the most part very direct. Sometimes people ask us: “Is this one of those performances in which I will have to participate?” A great number of people still like to have this safe position in the dark, i.e. I’ve to come to watch, so let me watch undisturbed, which in my view is perfectly legitimate. But it is precisely this that gives theatre a great advantage over film, for instance; the fact that it can use this living connection and open up the channel between two people who are differently positioned. In the case of Via Negativa, this theatrical moment is very real; we are here together in the here and now and in whatever is going to happen to us. It’s not about me doing what I have set out to do and that’s the end of the story; I want to nudge you, the spectator, out of your passive position. Some find this uncomfortable, while others love it.

**Why are you on the stage?**

Because on the stage I am far more alive, I exist more intensely. Every artist goes through crises in their creative life, asking themselves whether to go on at all. Every time anew I come to the realization that the stage is really something special, for me it’s priceless to be on stage. And this is something Via Negativa demands from the performer; if you want to be on the stage, you have to earn it. By investing into the process itself, for you to know why you are up there and not for the director to tell you why and what you should be doing there. This is the performer’s contribution, and it is massive.

**And what is your attitude towards the spectator? What is his function?**

To draw on his presence, to create together with him or her an event at a given time and a specific place, for something to happen which is not everyday-like. My attitude towards the spectator is such that I rouse an emotion in him and draw him out of indifference and state of despondency.

**Performer’s contribution is the foundation, while all the productions are created with the least input in terms of ideas from the director Bojan Jablanovec, the father of Via Negativa.**

Bojan is the first critical viewer. In the process he is first and foremost a spectator and only at a point when we run out of steam does he intervene by way of support. In that sense he is often the one who finalizes the matter, gives it a full stop or an exclamation mark. He is still the director, but of a different kind. The process is like organic molten lava, very tough (laughter), a river. You fall into it and the moment you start drowning, he comes to rescue. You try out his suggestion, while remaining active in your own search. Bojan won’t bother saving you if you have no idea what you’re doing. Performances take shape slowly, over the course of an entire year. We have cases of people who attended rehearsals throughout the year, but because they didn’t reach that clarity about what they were doing, nothing came out of it at the end.

**What about the point of excess?**
Via Negative is about demystifying everything. Already the fact that we worked consecutively on seven deadly sins ... sin itself is already an excess of sorts and is therefore already at the heart of what we are researching. There’s no such thing as perfection, there’s always going to be some error somewhere, Still Life being a case in point. One tilt and the meaning of the entire picture changes. Action with which you destroy what you have built, adding a big exclamation or question mark to it.

**Why is excess important?**

Excess is a bodily reaction to a feeling of suffocation and closeness and this feeling must express itself externally. It leaps out, because there’s no other way, because all around it something is not right. It’s an event, a moment, a commentary, from which this event emerges as something that cannot be repressed. It can be something quite simple. For example, we all pee every day, but the minute this happens on the stage, it becomes excessive. Why? We don’t want to see it, because we go to the theatre to see something beautiful. And then we see someone jerking off and someone else peeing. Maybe we want to point to the question of why is the spectator so upset in his petit-bourgeoisie mores that things we do everyday should offend him so. The expression excess seems excessive, because all these things can also be fun. It’s about playing with the moment of surprise, the moment of disgust, a physical reaction that is evoked in the spectator. Especially through bodily fluids, this being a medium at which point the spectator plugs his body into the process itself. Some people see Via Negativa akin to “Shopping and Fucking”, but there’s no aggression here by way of shock, in fact, it’s all very human. Via Negativa has an elegant way of doing things. To give you an example: when Katarina pierces her index finger so as to draw blood with which she signs a bank note, giving it added value as an artefact, because it carries her blood. There’s nothing shocking about this or aggressive, and still it contains blood.

**You started out as a ballerina, established yourself as a contemporary dancer and actress (the performance First Love received Zlata Ptica Award), and now we can detect a move in the direction of performing arts.**

True, though I still like to dance. After finishing ballet secondary school I asked myself whether I wanted to be a ballet dancer for the opera house. The answer was a no. Meeting Maja Delak was the first step towards contemporary dance and so I quickly swapped heights for nether regions and learnt how it feels to fall without getting all black and blue. Now I can appreciate theatre more wholly. If you ask me what I am, I am a dancer, an actress, a performer, a choreographer, a director. A stage is a stage. What matters is how what is put on functions. I am still interested in the classical theatre. I derive a lot of pleasure from seeing a performance, which succeeds in breaking through the sound barrier between myself and the actors.