

**Lonely Lamentations:
Feminisms in Slovak Performance Through the Work of Sláva Daubnerová**

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Dissertation - MA in Live Art
Queen Mary University of London

2020

Acknowledgments

Thank you to my supervisor Professor Dominic Johnson, for his enthusiasm, guidance and invaluable insight into live art and life throughout this project. Thanks to Jess Dawkins, for encouraging me and always answering the phone when I needed to discuss feminisms with someone. Last but not least, thank you to my partner James, for putting up with me during this particularly difficult academic year.

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Abstract

Despite Sláva Daubnerová being recognised by the Slovak theatre community as an important live artist, there is a notable lack of writing on feminisms within her work. Due to Slovakia's socio-culturally contingent history with the term, mainly due to the political indoctrination during the communist regime while a part of Czechoslovakia, the word feminism is predominantly viewed as an insult in Slovakia. Consequently, there is an absence of critical attention to feminism in Slovak performance scholarship as well as international lack of attention to Slovak performance more broadly. Through the case study of Daubnerová's live art practice, I set out to analyse the ways and the effects with which Daubnerová creates performances and invites a structural shift in live art consumption towards feminist spectatorship. Additionally, I enable anglophone readers to access Slovak feminist and performance discourse by privileging Slovak scholarly publications over Western ones and making them accessible through translation. Daubnerová's process positions herself within other women's biographies and explores her identity as a Slovak woman artist through them. She creates her performances based on rigorous historical and archival research into other women's biographies. Despite being based on other women's lives, Daubnerová performs as herself in her work. She does not try to impersonate or interpret them, rather contextualise her experience within their biographies. I argue that by positioning herself within the stories of other women, Daubnerová explores her identity as a woman performance artist in the context of Slovak theatre culture. Moreover, she challenges the masculinist set-up of spectatorship established within Slovak theatre, and by doing so invites structural changes that allow women to remain visible and represented. Through performance analysis of *Untitled* (2012) and *Solo Lamentoso* (2015), I suggest that Daubnerová's performance of women's disappearance, cultural dismissal and structural silencing within Slovak culture provokes her audience to recognise cultural biases towards women that remained as a result of indoctrination during the socialist regime. Daubnerová strategically distances herself from feminist discourse and instead creates performances that are subtly feminist but have systemic effects that shift Slovak art consumption towards individual acts of political agency.

Introduction

As the final notes of the aria dissipate, she simply stands there in a soft spotlight looking at the audience, only her lips visible under the big black wide brim hat. Motionless, she lip-syncs the final chilling line of the performance: 'I, Eva N., a victim of your bestiality, proclaim that an x number of people is not enough for my life'. She takes off her lace opera gloves and stares directly in my eyes. There's a strange feeling of distance between me, her and Eva N., and yet I somehow feel like we are the only two people in the room and that the performance I saw had nothing to do with Eva N. And just like that, the moment is shattered, other audience members start clapping and I leave without a shred of doubt that what I witnessed was a profound inner dialogue between Eva N.'s life and Sláva Daubnerová.

Daubnerová explores her identity as a woman performer in the context of Slovak theatre scene through the story of misunderstood and overlooked women. Her practice is heavily grounded in archival and interview-based research and seems to speak directly to the structural and social standing of women in Slovak society. Scholar Dáša Čiripová calls Daubnerová 'a singular phenomenon in Slovak theatre' since it is unapologetically authentic.¹ Daubnerová positions herself within the stories of strong women, but she does not try to embody them. Her performance style is purposefully disinterested, non-emotional and highly choreographed. This approach allows her to act as herself within the stories of other women, deploy their biographies as sites for her personal exploration of gender, and subtly invite the audience to participate in feminist modes of spectatorship. Daubnerová's emotionality is instead hidden in her mastery of her movements as a dancer, the conceptual dramaturgy of her performances, and the authenticity of her identity exploration. In her performances, the audience is privy to her inner processes that would have not involve any facial expressions or words if she had performed without an audience. Additionally, this performance mode suggests that there is no singular female experience, that women do not owe anybody emotionality, and that even though Daubnerová performs with the stories of other women, she explores her own experience and does not seek to recreate theirs. Daubnerová's practice of positioning her own embodied experience in the context of

¹ Dáša Čiripová, 'Editorial' in *konkrétne o divadle*, April 2013, 1. My translation.

another woman's experience allows for a chiasmic interplay between the subject and object of the performance. The collapse between the self and the other, between the signifier and the signified, and between the performer and the performance exacerbates the relationship between the public and the private, between the audience and the performer. According to Čiripová, 'Daubnerová's experimental performances drift towards a clearly defined account [...] of her position towards [Slovakia's] current socio-political situation'.²

Daubnerová's unique position as a performer in the context of Slovak theatre scene is also strategically feminist. According to Škripková, performance is pioneered by feminist artists in Slovakia, since it allows for 'expression of feminist politics independently of the contemporary theatre scene'.³ Škripková suggests that the contemporary theatre spectatorship remains masculinist as a result of the institutional privileging of men in positions of power due to nepotism during Czechoslovakia. Additionally, Slovak language is morphologically gendered - all nouns, adjectives, pronouns, numbers and verbs are gender-specific; and a masculine gender is privileged as neutral. Jana Valdrová argues that by using generic masculine, 'invokes images of men, thus rendering women invisible [...] and reinforcing the existing gender hierarchy'.⁴ By using the word "divák"(spectator) and "herec"(actor) as a generic masculine, female spectatorship is invalidated and male spectatorship is rendered as the default perspective. Daubnerová instead insists on being called "performerka" [performer (fem.)] and uses "obecenstvo" [audience (neu.)] to position herself outside of the masculinist spectatorship context of Slovak theatre consumption and propose solutions to the current gendered preconceptions. Her choice of artistic medium and vocabulary allows her to invite feminist readings of her performance and critically interrogate masculinism of Slovak performance consumption. Daubnerová says that she left her job in a theatre to become a performer. She started making performance art inspired by strong women to help her 'get on [her] own two feet and do something [she] can stand up for'. She adds that performing alone is 'very stressful and one of the biggest burdens [she has] ever had to carry'.⁵ Daubnerová strategically refuses to openly use feminist rhetoric and

² Čiripová, 1.

³ Iveta Škripková, *Femini[(ta)-(zacia)]zmy a divadlo [Femini[(ty)-(sation)]sms and theatre]*, 2016, unpublished PhD thesis, 135. My translation.

⁴ Jana Valdrová, 'Typological Differences between Languages as an Argument against Gender-Fair Language Use?' in *Czech Feminisms: Perspectives on Gender in East Central Europe*, eds. Iveta Jusová, Jiřina Šiklová, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 274.

⁵ Daubnerová in Adela Vinczeová, 'Sláva Daubnerová - Trochu inak s Adelou', *Youtube*, 25 Nov 2019, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d5VB8ABPGRs&t=619s>> [accessed 09/08/2020]. My translation.

instead only hints at her experience of structural bias towards women artists in Slovakia since, due to the particular history of Slovakia with feminism, feminist rhetoric tend to be counterproductive and alienating. By performing alone, positioning herself within the history of live art and its feminist implications in the context of Slovakia, and by disrupting linguistic preconceptions about a neutral audience member or performer, Daubnerová subtly uses the inner workings of Slovak art culture as a site for conversation about the role of women within Slovak society.

Cultural Context

Slovakia's scepticism towards feminism is heavily rooted in 40 years of socialist driven political indoctrination while a part of Czechoslovakia which labelled feminism as evil and Western. In 1994, theatre scholar Nadežda Lindovská wrote that 'the word "feminism" means an insult in Slovakia'.⁶ Slovakia's history with feminism is relatively short, but uncomfortable. In the view of the communist party, there was no need for feminism, because communism renders all humans equal in society. According to art historian Katarína Rusnáková, while the regime 'declared female emancipation, it was only one of its ideological mystifications'.⁷ Women were expected to do the same jobs that men did while receiving a lower salary and carrying out housework and bringing up children. Rusnáková argues that 'the regime did formally declare equality of women and men with no real fulfilment of equality between men and women'.⁸ After Czechoslovakia split in 1993, the status of women as well as the views on feminism remained mostly unchanged. The 40 years of political indoctrination led to 'women [being] afraid of being labelled as feminists', since 'the term "feminism" is understood as violent hatred towards men' as Lindovská argued.⁹ In the eyes of Slovak popular and scholarly discourse, the scepticism towards feminism is still tangible both in the rhetoric employed around feminism and the status of women in the country as well as the strategies scholars and artists employ when interrogating the public's stance towards it. Thirty years since the fall of the iron curtain, feminism is still on par with

⁶ Originally published in Slovak in 1994. Nadežda Lindovská, "'Feminism" is an Insult in Slovakia' in *Theatre Journal*, Vol 47., No. 3, (Oct 1995), 381.

⁷ Katarína Rusnáková, *Rodové aspekty v súčasnom vizuálnom umení na Slovensku*, (Banská Bystrica: Akadémia umení v Banskej Bystrici, 2009), 7. [*Gender Aspects in Contemporary Visual Art in Slovakia*]. My translation.

⁸ Rusnáková, 7.

⁹ Lindovská, 1995, 381.

insults in Slovakia. That is not to say that there is no feminist theory or art in Slovakia, but that in order to enter popular discourse, feminist theory and practice alike often camouflages itself. As a result, performers such as Daubnerová strategically refuse to identify themselves as explicitly feminist, even though their work is enacting feminist politics.

The strategy to create feminist performances on and against the anti-feminist structures is a direct result of Slovakia's scepticism towards feminism. In 1994, Lindovská wrote that 'there is no Slovak theatre that would orient itself toward feminism' due to women's fear of being associated with the movement.¹⁰ Lindovská later revised the argument in 2008 by saying that 'over time, there was a move from ignorance of feminism, through denying it altogether to a relatively tolerant attitude'.¹¹ Nonetheless, the relative tolerance towards feminist art was more prevalent in the academic community than in most audience members. Lindovská argued that '[Slovak] scholars adopted feminist politics before the theatre practitioners and audience did'.¹² Consequently, many performers such as Daubnerová strategically refuse to identify themselves as feminists.

Contemporary Slovak feminist discourse privileges the term postfeminism as their current understanding of the field.¹³ In her thorough report on different aspects of feminisms in contemporary art in Slovakia, Rusnáková reports that 'in terms of using the correct contemporary terminology [in Slovakia], the two most widely accepted terms [...] are postfeminism and gender art'.¹⁴ The term postfeminism has a rich and controversial history. Originally coined to suggest that feminism has achieved its goals, postfeminism was widely dismissed by many feminist thinkers and writers at first. The suggestion that feminism has achieved its goals and has been somehow surpassed was the main point of contention between academic and popular deployment of the term.¹⁵ Amelia Jones argued that 'while

¹⁰ Lindovská, 1995, 392.

¹¹ Nadežda Lindovská, 'Redefinícia divadla?' in *Slovenské divadlo* ['Redefining theatre?' in *Slovak Theatre*], Vol. 56, No. 3., 2008, 321. My translation.

¹² Lindovská, 2008, 321.

¹³ There is a discussion in Slovakia about whether the term postfeminism should indeed be used for the current version of feminism. In Slovakia, postfeminism is often conflated with third-wave feminism, since they both came about as a criticism of second wave feminism and privilege more gender-neutral analysis and intersectionality. For more information, see Rusnáková; Škripková; Martina Pachmanová, *Věrnost v pohybu: Hovory o feminizmu, dějinách a vizualitě* [*Authenticity in Movement: Discussion on Feminism, History and Visuality*], (Prague: One Woman Press, 2001).

¹⁴ Rusnáková, 21.

¹⁵ For a wider account of the discussion around postfeminism in Anglo-American context, see Amelia Jones, *Seeing Differently: A history and theory of identification and the visual arts*, (London: Routledge, 2012); Ann Brooks, *Postfeminism, cultural theory and cultural forms*, (London: Routledge, 1997); Stéphanie Genz, 'Third Way/ve: The politics of postfeminism' in *Feminist Theory*, Vol. 7, Issue 3, 2006.

some of the curators and writers articulating postfeminist ideas were sympathetic to feminist political goals, the politics of some of the discourses around post-feminism (particularly those in the popular media such as *Time* magazine) were highly disturbing and had anti-feminist implications. For the writers in venues such as *Time*, post-feminism meant the end of feminism'.¹⁶ The suggestion that feminism has achieved its goal has been widely dismissed as a strawman fallacy, but the subtle linguistic implications remain encoded within the term. According to Rusnáková, Slovak discourse has adopted the term partially due to 'changes within art thinking [towards] irony, pastiche and appropriation'.¹⁷ Due to Slovakia's scepticism towards feminism, postfeminism was a convenient term for Slovak academic discourse. In terms of academia, it allowed feminist writers to contextualise themselves within broader academic discourse and strategically use the irony embedded within the term to critically investigate Slovakia's particular approach to feminism. Iveta Škripková similarly notes that the term postfeminism gained friction in Slovakia since it allows 'the new generation of women that often say "I'm not a feminist, but..." or "I'm a feminist, but..." to do feminist work despite 'a unified global media pressure of the fundamental myth that feminism=hatred toward men [sic]. [Postfeminism] allows women to "do feminism their own way"'.¹⁸ Similarly to the women from Škripková's analysis, Daubnerová does not associate herself with feminism as a movement. By utilizing postfeminism as a term, performers such as Daubnerová can create feminist work without aligning themselves with a specific version of feminism.

Daubnerová's strategy to distance herself from feminist politics is partially due to the particular mode of theatre spectatorship within Slovakia. Due to the socio-culturally contingent history of Slovak art consumption, Slovak spectatorship imagines a white heterosexual male as the generic audience. Daubnerová's performance, however, invites a mode of spectatorship that is distinctly feminist alongside the default masculinist one. By masculinism and masculinist spectatorship, I mean to suggest a mode of spectatorship that is not anti-feminist or misogynist, but spectatorship that is apathetical or forgetful about women. That is not to say that masculinism and focus on social issues related to men and boys are not important, but it is to say that catering to the dominant hegemony while

¹⁶ Jones, 142. Original emphasis.

¹⁷ Rusnáková, 21n8.

¹⁸ Škripková, 169.

ignoring the non-dominant narratives can sometimes lead to missing the point altogether. Daubnerová's performance does not do away with generic masculine spectatorship inherent in Slovak language and history but it does invite feminist spectatorship alongside it as a more inclusive alternative. As Škripková pointed out, 'there is no feminist audience to speak of in Slovakia' and creating performance with a feminist audience in mind 'would be in vain'.¹⁹ Daubnerová's approach to subtly encourage the audience to think of themselves as feminist spectators, on the other hand, is perhaps subtle but also surprisingly effective within Slovak performance consumption.

When suggesting that Slovak theatre spectatorship is set up in a masculinist way, I do not mean to say that the set-ups in Western performance consumption is somehow better than the Slovak one. Slovakia has a particular history with feminism and there are many differing views on the matter within the country. While there is an ongoing discussion in Slovakia about female reproductive rights on a legislative level,²⁰ it is worth saying that similar discussions pop up in the Anglo-phone world as well - for instance, there is an ongoing discussion in the USA about access to abortions and, until recently, it was a major point of contention in Ireland. Slovak approach to feminism is not bad or backwards as it might seem from the point of Western feminism, but it is simply different, unique and historically dependent. Škripková argued that due to Slovakia's relationship with feminism as a movement, it is important to understand the differences between Western and Slovak feminism. According to Škripková, 'the differences in time, space and causality between [Slovak and international feminisms] are astonishing', but nonetheless, 'the international and national movements share the most important similarity - the focus of study, which is a female identity in a gender-asymmetrical society'.²¹ While keeping in mind the particularity of Slovakia's history of feminism, Slovak scholarship uses Western feminist theory as a cornerstone for 'analysis, artistic portrayal, coding and decoding [...] of female identity' in the art sector.²² As Škripková suggests, however, it is important to note the differences

¹⁹ Iveta Škripková, personal communication, December 2019.

²⁰ For instance, see Adriana Mesochoritsová, 'V predložených návrhoch ide o moc, nie o pomoc' in *ASPEKTin - feministický webzín*, ['The Proposed Bill is about Power, Not Help' in *ASPEKTin - feminist webzine*], 8 July 2020, [<http://aspekt.sk/content/aspektin/v-predlozenych-navrhoch-ide-o-moc-nie-o-pomoc>] <accessed 13/08/2020> Denisa Nešťáková in Katarína Stríčková, 'Pozná interrupčný zákon slovenského štátu: Diskusia o potratoch ukazuje, že sme sa za 80 rokov neposunuli' in *Denník N*, 19 July 2020, <<https://dennikn.sk/1973575/pozna-interruptny-zakon-slovenskeho-statu-diskusia-o-potratoch-ukazuje-ze-sme-sa-za-80-rokov-neposunuli/?ref=mwat>> [accessed 24/07/2020]

²¹ Škripková, 173.

²² Škripková, 173.

between national and international deployment of feminism and the different challenges feminism faces in the national context. Throughout this dissertation, I privilege writings by Slovak or post-USSR Slavic writers over Anglo-American writers where possible and select writings by Western writers if they are known, quoted or published in Slovak feminist and/or art discourse.²³

Methodology

This project's methodology was moulded by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the project would take on a different shape if it were not for restrictions put in place to limit the spread of the virus. As such, throughout this dissertation, I make extended references to Daubnerová's performances, secondary sources about the performances, Daubnerová's work, national feminist and international feminist contexts, and primary archival sources obtained digitally from Daubnerová and the Slovak Theatre Institute. In terms of the works themselves, I try to write personally and affectively with the work and position myself within the performance as an audience member. This mode of analysis embedded in my experience has a precedence in Jennifer Doyle's *Hold it Against Me*. Throughout her work, Doyle explores ways of 'learning how to write about work [...] that feels emotionally sincere or real and produces a dense field of affect around it even as it seems to dismantle the mechanisms through which emotion is produced and consumed'.²⁴ This style of writing allows Doyle to critically analyse her affective response to works that are difficult, controversial or emotional to a point where a critic's faculties fail. Similarly to Doyle, writing myself into Daubnerová's performances as the audience member allows me to analyse the semiotic, textual and structural levels of Daubnerová's performances as well as pay attention to the affective field rooted in my identity and experience as a Slovak spectator.

In chapter 1 and 2, I analyse Daubnerová's works *Untitled* and *Solo Lamentoso* respectively through three levels of gender experience. Škripková suggests that Slovak feminist performance should be examined through what she calls 'the gender triad (also commonly used as a triangular relation between the author, art piece and audience) [which]

²³ All quotations translated from Slovak are translated by me unless indicated otherwise.

²⁴ Jennifer Doyle, *Hold it Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art*, (London: Duke University Press, 2013), XI.

demonstrates the importance of differentiating’ mechanics of gender identity.²⁵ According to Škripková, feminist politics operates within performance on three levels - the symbolic level of the performance’s content, the individual level of the performer’s identity and her relationship to the work, and the structural level of spectatorship and socio-cultural contexts. In chapter 1, I analyse how these three levels of gender experience operate in relation to Daubnerová’s *Untitled* (2012). Through the work and biography of Francesca Woodman, Daubnerová explores her identity as a performer and individual pressures on women artists to disappear. Chapter 2 focuses on *Solo Lamentoso* (2015) in which Daubnerová continues her exploration of disappearance as a mode of performance making but explores it on a systemic and structural level. Through the story of a local feud in rural Slovakia, Daubnerová investigates societal biases towards women and how the intersections of identities as well as historical and political biases marginalise women’s voices in the public discourse.

Finally, in a still tumultuous situation 30 years after the fall of the USSR, many Eastern and Central European countries find themselves in situations where their citizen’s identities are sites for political lobbying and ideological misdirection. Artists such as Daubnerová are a utopian reminder that a nation is not its legislature nor its official ideology. There is a great value in creating gender-sensitive work, be it queer, feminist, or other, both through subtlety and explosive grand gestures. I am reminded of Deb Margolin’s assertion that ‘for a woman, standing up in front of people is a radical political act, expressing, as it does, the desire to speak’.²⁶ Margolin suggests that, in the context of women’s biographies, performance is a way capable of inspiring political agency. Seeing Daubnerová alone on stage, allowing for audiences to experience her inner world framed by the life and work of another woman, fills me with similar utopian feelings of political agency. A type of subtle quiet inner excitement that should not go unnoticed in the noise of political populism.

²⁵ Škripková, 68.

²⁶ Deb Margolin paraphrased in Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theatre*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 56.

1. Hide and Seek: An Exploration of Female Disappearance in *Untitled* (2012)

And then I realised that what we are actually doing is not unlike playing hide and seek. She crawls behind a piece of peeling wallpaper, I follow her there with my eyes. I am aware of where she is and she knows I would be; yet I somehow manage to lose her in the scene. Hiding behind a leaf-like piece of wallpaper, an old projector switching slides shining at her naked body, she gets down on her knees. And suddenly in the short darkness between two projector slides, she is lost again. Disappeared.

Untitled, first performed in 2012, is Sláva Daubnerová's exploration of herself as a woman Slovak artist through the proxy of Francesca Woodman's oeuvre.²⁷ Through careful choreography, Daubnerová re-imagines the process behind Woodman's photographs and positions herself as the disappearing body in space. In this work, Daubnerová challenges the supposedly ontological nature of performance and the underlying tensions between traces of the body and a live body in space. This tension is emblematic of the relationship between photography and performance, and possibly between biographical and autobiographical performance. While watching *Untitled*, as an audience member, I cannot stop but ask why Daubnerová hides within the stories of other women and, similarly, why she chooses to perform a material as static, constant and reproducible as photography.

The performance begins with Daubnerová standing next to Woodman's handwritten phrase 'self-portrait' projected onto an irregularly coloured screen while holding an old-fashioned camera. Loud synth-noise booms through the room as Daubnerová adjusts the camera on her tripod and while taking off her black fur coat, she walks behind the projection screen. A mechanical click of an old projector changing slides is followed by a brief blackout between images, and Woodman's writing on the screen reads 'then at one point i did not need to translate the notes; they went directly into my hands'. The writing is a hand-written title of one of Woodman's famous pieces of work, in which she squats facing a wall covered in wallpaper and pushes her hands against the wall. In her work, Woodman seems to

²⁷ *Untitled*, perf. by Sláva Daubnerová, 2012 in MM/3053, Audiovisual Archive, Videotéka, Divadelný Ústav Bratislava.

disappear, to fade into the background, or to become an ethereal, blurred trace in spaces. Like an elusive and ephemeral figure, she plays hide and seek with her audience and herself. According to Sean O'Hagan, Woodman had been preoccupied with disappearance as her central theme throughout her work. He suggests that at a young age, Woodman 'had found a way to hide in front of the camera, and, in doing so, had also found her abiding theme. Nearly 30 years after her death, she is still hiding from us in full view, as elusive and beguiling as ever'.²⁸ In her review of *Untitled*, quoting O'Hagan's review, Soňa Šimková notes that 'there are many conspicuous similarities between [Daubnerová and Woodman]. Did Sláva find her alter ego?'²⁹ In her projects, Daubnerová envelops herself in the biography of a particular performance subject. Woodman's biography seems inseparable from Daubnerová's enactment of Woodman's works at first glance, but, as Šimková argues, 'seeing the Slovak performer's face on Woodman's is only a superficial similarity'.³⁰ Daubnerová does not seek to represent Woodman's life, but explores her own whilst using Woodman's photographs as performance prompts. While in Woodman's work it seems like Woodman tries to hide from the spectator despite being the sole object within her work, Daubnerová wants to be seen despite performing disappearance.

When the light comes up, suddenly we see Daubnerová naked squatting next to the projection screen, hugging her knees in a foetal position. Scurrying on her toes, she moves to the projection screen, peels off part of the wallpaper, and covers her body with it, so only her feet are visible. She squats facing the wall covered with wallpaper and pushes her hands against the wall.

Daubnerová strategically chooses her vocabulary and framing in order to present feminist politics on three experiential levels. She uses gender as an analytical category in her performance in order to challenge preconceptions about gender production within art. Slovak performance theorist Iveta Škripková suggests that in performance it is important to differentiate between the individual gender of the performer, structural gender politics of performance consumption, and symbolic gender representation of the performance's

²⁸ Sean O'Hagan, 'Francesca Woodman - review' in *The Guardian*, 21 Nov, 2010, <<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2010/nov/21/francesca-woodman-photographs-miro-review>> [accessed 26 June 2020].

²⁹ Soňa Šimková, 'Originálna Cesta Slávy Daubnerovej alebo mágia divadla' in *konkrétne o divadle*, 2013, Issue 4, (2013), 14. ['The Unique Journey of Sláva Daubnerová or the Magic of Theatre' in *specifically about theatre*] My translation.

³⁰ Šimková, 15.

content. She argues that ‘this gender triad (also commonly used as a triangular relation between the author, art piece and audience) demonstrates the importance of differentiating and acknowledging’ the different aspects of gender mechanics within art.³¹ In relation to *Untitled*, it is important to analyse the strategic choices Daubnerová employs in relation to these gender mechanics. Šimková writes that *Untitled* allows us to analyse ‘the artistic process of Sláva Daubnerová. Why she cocoons herself into stories of other artists, how hiding within them allows her to access and present her authentic self, and what art means to her on an existential level’.³² It is important, then, to analyse the performance as a method of exploring gender both in term of Daubnerová’s own gender identity, Woodman’s life and art practice, and the ways these two allow for structural changes towards feminist spectatorship.

Symbolic Gender: Woodman’s Self-fleeting

Firstly, by referencing Woodman’s work, Daubnerová explores the themes of female disappearance embedded in Woodman’s practice. In the light of her early death, Woodman’s photography eerily seems to rehearse her own disappearance. In her work, she tries to prepare us, the audience, for when she is gone. Peggy Phelan has argued that Woodman’s work and suicide ‘allows us to consider her art as an apprenticeship in dying, rather than the thing that somehow outlasts or conquers death. [...] Woodman invites us to see her suicide, like her art, as a gift. Perhaps not the one we might have wished for, but the one she gave us when she did not have anything to give’.³³ As a performance scholar, Phelan analyses Woodman’s work through the lens of ephemerality and disappearance and emphasizes the process of capturing her fleeting blurred body over the photographs themselves, which she views as impressions and traces left over by Woodman’s body at a moment when it is already gone. Phelan’s argument is callous in proposing that Woodman’s death was an almost inevitable resolution of her work. It is a difficult argument to justify but an easy argument to write - Woodman’s death seems to me astonishingly intertwined with her art,

³¹ Škripková, 68.

³² Šimková, 17.

³³ Peggy Phelan, ‘Francesca Woodman’s Photography: Death and the Image One More Time’ in *Signs*, Vol 27, No. 4, (2002), 1002.

but I wonder whether that is due to the benefit of hindsight. Phelan wrote the argument at a moment when most writing about Woodman ignored her suicide, trying to sterilise Woodman's work from her mental health. While Phelan's reading of Woodman's work does make some crude psychologising gestures and makes difficult and cold-blooded jumps in imagination, it does allow us to read Woodman's work and life as a struggle for visibility and empathy. A struggle that Woodman was consciously and perpetually losing, until she disappeared at the moment of her death. To create her work, Woodman had to be moving continuously and erratically in front of the camera in order to disappear. Woodman's disappearance is then later re-performed when the spectator encounters it and tries to "capture" Woodman by finding her in her photographs. Phelan argues that, in the case of Woodman, 'the photograph must be interpreted, indeed developed by the viewer. Thus, we can say that we have moved from the age of the spectacle as such to the age of the spectator's response to that spectacle; the spectator's response has become its own performance'.³⁴ Encountering Woodman's photograph is a spectacle of witnessing disappearance. By capturing fleetingness through the relatively permanent medium of photography Woodman's work allows us to continuously experience her disappearance whenever we encounter her photographs. Phelan argues that Woodman's 'suicide might be the result of a well-considered logic and [her] photography was a way to help her, and us, survive her disappearance from the surface of the visible world'.³⁵

The room is plunged into darkness before a projection of Woodman's handwriting is projected again on the screen. In the short period of darkness, the music stopped, Daubnerová disappeared from the performance space, and we were left only with Woodman's writing while listening to the high-pitched noises of lights and projections and the mechanical whirring of the old-fashioned camera. 'these things arrived from my grandmother' and the projector clicks as the slides change. 'they make me think about where I fit'. Click. 'in this odd geometry of time'. Click. 'This mirror is a sort of rectangle'. Click. 'although they say that mirrors are just water specified'.³⁶ Daubnerová comes back on stage and refuses to look at the audience. She starts setting up her next series of portraits for which she poses by moving continuously and covering her face. Despite performing

³⁴ Phelan, 983.

³⁵ Phelan, 991.

³⁶ Daubnerová used handwritten quotes from Woodman's book of her photographs. Francesca Woodman, *Some Disordered Interior Geometries*, (New York: Synapse Press, 1981).

Woodman's process of disappearance, Daubnerová draws attention to herself, fighting to stay visible.

Similarly to Phelan, Daubnerová understands Woodman's work as a quest for disappearance. Phelan's argument sparked much controversy, however. Elizabeth Bronfen, for instance, criticised Phelan for arriving at her conclusion from the other way around:

Woodman's tragic suicide[...] compelled critics to look for traits in her photographs that might explain her premature demise. Peggy Phelan suggests that the young artist used her photographic works to explore her mysterious relation to the development and disappearance of her own image.[...] One could, however, also read Woodman's obsessive engagement with her own disappearance in our field of vision in more productive terms. By resolutely dedicating herself to the fragility of her own appearance as a photographic rendition, Woodman highlights the very inexorable inconstancy that ties the vitality of artistic work to the transience of life.³⁷

For Bronfen, Woodman's work is about her fragility and about testing the limits between the permanence of photography and the transience of life. I agree that Phelan's argument is cold-hearted and controversial, but some of its implications are surprisingly sensitive.³⁸ Phelan's reading allows us to consider Woodman's suicide not as a tragic act of an emotionally unstable woman full of shame, failure and anguish, to use Phelan's assertion, but as a story of a woman who consciously chose her suicide as the end point of her artistic self-expression. In a program note for *Untitled*, Daubnerová similarly suggests that '[Woodman's] photographs, in which she captures herself, suggest her own future death'.³⁹ Such a reading dispels gender essentialist reading of female suicide based on the premise that women are weak, emotional, irrational, hormonal: "women be crazy", or in its Slovak equivalent, "ženy hysterky" (hysterical women). Biological gender essentialism is highly problematic from the point of view of postfeminism, since it assumes a universal woman experience and ignores other aspects of women's identities. Additionally, it delegitimises

³⁷ Elizabeth Bronfen, 'Leaving an Imprint: Francesca Woodman's Photographic Tableaux Vivants' in *Francesca Woodman: Works from the Sammlung Verbund*, (New York City: Distributed Art Publishers, 2014), 15.

³⁸ Phelan wrote the essay 21 years after Woodman's death in 2002 to attempt to reframe the discussion in a way that would try to connect Woodman's suicide to her art, since in the early years after her suicide most critical literature 'made a conscious decision not to discuss Woodman's suicide' as a redemptive gesture towards Woodman. Phelan, 984.

³⁹ Sláva Daubnerová, *Untitled*, program note, undated. My translation.

women's emotionality by portraying it as merely hormonal. According to Ľubica Kobová, gender essentialism 'purposefully ignores sociocultural influences upon the construction of gender and over-simplifies the way biological bodies function'.⁴⁰ Essentialism is still present in Slovak art as a remnant of art censorship during the normalisation period, in which art was only officially recognised if it adhered to certain dogmas of socialist realism; as a result, gender is still represented predominantly as a set of biologically observable features.⁴¹ Katarina Rusnáková argues that the period of normalization 'affirmed the ontological role of art, which oriented the representation of the human body towards its essential signifiers'.⁴² Phelan's argument, while instrumentalising and negating Woodman's pain as strategic, conceptual, and necessary, allows us to consider Woodman's work and life as work that did eventually lead to her tragic suicide rather than a work that lives separate to it.

The structure of *Untitled* is evocative of understanding Woodman's work as an exploration of disappearance. From the very beginning of the performance, Daubnerová plays a game of hide and seek with her audience. When she first comes on stage, she quickly disappears behind the projection wall in the middle of the stage only to reappear again for a moment and disappear again. Then she reappears again and disappears behind the piece of wallpaper falling off. When the lights go off, she disappears again behind the wall only to reappear moments later. In the brief moments between scenes when Daubnerová moves from one of Woodman's image to another, she disappears behind the wall, often without giving the audience a chance to notice how or when she did so. There is, however, little to no need to do so, since all her props are on the stage from the beginning and at several points throughout the performance she changes her costume directly on stage. Her disappearances seem like a conscious and literal interpretation of the drive behind Woodman's work. Every time Daubnerová disappears, I was wondering whether she would resurface again or whether we would be left aching for more. Similarly to Phelan, Daubnerová understands and re-imagines Woodman's photographs against the grain of biological essentialism by interpreting her suicide as a conscious act following Woodman's artistic enquiry into disappearance, which challenges the gender essentialism of the Slovak art context. Šimková argues that Daubnerová's choice of positioning herself within Woodman's photography

⁴⁰ Ľubica Kobová, 'Esencializmus' in *Glosar Rodovej Terminologie* ['Essentialism' in *A Glossary of Gender Terminology*], (Bratislava: Aspekt, 2017). My translation.

⁴¹ For wider context of normalization's influence on feminist art see Rusnáková, 6-15.

⁴² Rusnáková, 12.

allows her to ‘transform and perform a negative code into a positive act’.⁴³ Daubnerová’s performance seems to transform the negative connotations of Woodman’s suicide into a gift for the audience. After all, as Phelan argues, ‘downplaying [suicide] in the critical literature devoted to a gifted artist can obscure what may well be a central achievement of the artist’s work and life. Perhaps if we begin to consider the urge toward suicide as a subject of artwork we might begin to transform its possible meanings.’⁴⁴

Finally, by exploring her performance practice in reference to Woodman’s, Daubnerová explores the relationship between photography and performance. Woodman’s practice seems to blur the ontological line between photography and performance as artistic media as well. O’Hagan calls Woodman’s work ‘performance photography’,⁴⁵ Phelan notes her writing and descriptions function as ‘scores for performance’,⁴⁶ and Šimková describes her oeuvre as a constant ‘running away from the camera’s gaze’.⁴⁷ Photography seems to be ontologically at odds with performance, since performance suggests fleetingness and unrepeatability and photography is relatively static and reproducible. Laco Teren similarly noted that performance ‘is uncapturable, it is there and then, not after that or before that. Photography is also only a split second of illumination of a light-sensitive material, but it is a picture - a relatively accurate document, trace, reflection’.⁴⁸ Indeed, in some ways, photography and performance are seemingly very similar, in many others they are directly antithetical. For Phelan, Woodman’s work is ‘dancing toward and against the drift toward self-creation and self-cessation [...] Woodman sought to record the affective force of what might be an essential self-fleeting’.⁴⁹ When Woodman hides from us in her photography, when her body is blurred, she performs for the camera in an attempt to capture the uncapturable. What we then encounter is somewhere between photographic art and a document of live art.⁵⁰ By positioning herself within Woodman’s practice, Daubnerová similarly explores the supposedly ontological nature of performance as fleeting and

⁴³ Šimková, 14.

⁴⁴ Phelan, 985.

⁴⁵ O’Hagan.

⁴⁶ Phelan, 991.

⁴⁷ Šimková, 15.

⁴⁸ Laco Teren, ‘Then at one point i did not need to translate the notes, they went directly to my hands’ in *konkrétne o divadle [specifically about theatre]*, 2013, Issue 4, (2013), 18. My translation.

⁴⁹ Phelan, 999.

⁵⁰ The ontological status of the performance document is not the focus of this work and much has already been written about it. See for example Tracey Warr, “Image as Icon: Recognizing the Enigma,” in *Art, Lies, and Videotape: Exposing Performance*, ed. Adrian George (Liverpool: Tate, 2003).

photography as stable. When experiencing Daubnerová performing Woodman's oeuvre, I find myself interpreting, indeed developing the performance and its images alongside each other at the moment when I encounter them - a process which, as Phelan argued, 'has become its own performance'.⁵¹

Individual Gender: Cocooned Choreography

When the lights come up, Daubnerová is naked next to the projection screen resembling a wall covered in mouldy wallpaper in a desolate house. A soft spotlight and a fast flash hit her body, burning the simultaneously beautiful and unsettling scene into the viewer's retina. She folds her body so her breasts rest between her knees and starts walking on all fours but with her hands in the back and her feet in the front. She looks towards the audience softly before slowly shifting back towards the mouldy wall.

Watching *Untitled*, I am reminded of the chiasmic relationship between subject and object embodied by the performer and the performance within live art. In *Body Art/Performing the Subject*, Amelia Jones analysed the chiasmus between subject and object within body art as a '*simultaneous subject/objectification - one is always already both at the same time*'.⁵² According to Jones, there is a chiasmic reciprocal intertwining between 'the seeing body and the visible body: we are both subject and object simultaneously and our "flesh" merges with the flesh that is the world'.⁵³ The relationship between the body of the performer as both the art object and the creator of the art often becomes tangible in live art performances. Alexandra Vujanović argues that in live art 'performers are simultaneously subjects and objects of the performance, and those who spectate it become potential performers themselves'.⁵⁴ In other words, Daubnerová is both the performer and the art piece that the audience witnesses. In the case of *Untitled*, the chiasmic relationship becomes further entangled, since Daubnerová is positioning herself within Woodman's biography. Daubnerová's deployment of Woodman's art complicates the matter of what the

⁵¹ Phelan, 983.

⁵² Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 40. Original emphasis.

⁵³ Jones, 41. Original emphasis.

⁵⁴ Alexandra Vujanović, Ana Jovicević, *Úvod do performatívnych štúdií*, [Introduction to Performance Studies], (Bratislava: Divadelný Ústav, 2012) 48. My translation.

performance object is. In *Untitled*, the audience experiences both Daubnerová's living breathing body and a reanimation of Woodman's photographs as art objects. Daubnerová does not try to impersonate Woodman or interpret her work, but rather uses her work as a catalyst for her own provocation. Woodman's work then becomes a secondary layer of the performance object and Daubnerová embodies both the object of the performance, which is her body, and the object of the performance's context, which is Woodman's work. Daubnerová complicates the chiasmus of the subject/object relationship as embodied by the performer/performance paradigm by strategically positioning herself within someone else's biography. Šimková notes that Daubnerová's approach of 'cocooning' herself within other biographies allows her to 'create a dialogue with them, to find answers to her own undoubtedly tortuous creative and existential enquiries. She uses their artefacts to arrive at her own solutions, to her own personal authentic account'.⁵⁵ Daubnerová inserts herself within Woodman's work and biography in order to explore societal and cultural influences upon her identity and artistic practice. Her reimaging of the photographs does not allow the audience and the performer to discover something about Woodman. Instead, Daubnerová uses her performance to allow herself to explore her own identity as a woman artist in the context of Slovak performance.

By exploring Woodman's photography, Daubnerová interrogates her own art practice as a practice of disappearance. After all, due to positioning herself within other biographies, Daubnerová herself seemingly disappears within the work. Dancing through Woodman's images, hiding behind pieces of wallpaper, flashing her vulva in a mirror while wearing a sheer dress, or crawling awkwardly completely naked, Daubnerová is seemingly invisible throughout the performance. Woodman's work, as Phelan argued, is permeated with her own exploration of disappearance and her quest for invisibility. Daubnerová seemingly understands Woodman's work as an exploration of disappearance, but by positioning herself within her work and life, she complicates her own disappearance throughout the performance. Daubnerová is not performing Woodman but rather her understanding of Woodman's work. Positioning herself within Woodman's photographs allows Daubnerová to push against Woodman's investigation by extending it and making it her own. While Woodman wants to disappear despite being the main object of her photography, Daubnerová wants to be seen despite being invisible. Daubnerová's constant movement and

⁵⁵ Šimková 13.

random motions disrupt the stillness of photographs. When she hangs dresses and blouses on the wall and positions herself amongst them as a recreation of Woodman's photograph, she does not look to the side or cover her face with hair as Woodman did but instead stares at the audience and moves her hands swiftly, as if to draw attention to her living body. Interestingly, the same movements Woodman performed in order to disappear in her photographs make Daubnerová ostensibly visible in her performance. While Woodman's blurry body seems to ask questions about women's disappearance into the background, Daubnerová's performance answers the question by performing her experience and refusing to disappear. By constantly moving and breaking up her stillness, she asks the audience to notice her and to recognise her as a living human amongst the objects. Her refusal to disappear is an effective commentary on her experience as a woman performance artist in the context of theatres. In an interview with Adela Vinczeová, Daubnerová says that her performances 'are very far away from traditional theatre. [...]I have always had the best reactions from audiences that were inexperienced theatre spectators'.⁵⁶ Daubnerová's unique standing as a performer within theatre tradition in Slovakia has inadvertently caused her art to go unnoticed, get misconstrued, or disappear. Daubnerová suggests that it is partially due to her gender, partially due to her education in cultural studies instead of theatre, and partially due to the masculinist set up of Slovak theatre spectatorship.⁵⁷ By extending Woodman's investigation and exploring ways in which she can remain visible despite structural disappearance, Daubnerová challenges the contexts within which she is allowed to perform and tries to find ways in which she can represent herself as a woman artist and not disappear.

Structural Gender: Nakedness as a Costume

Throughout the performance, Daubnerová always finds her way out of the audience's field of vision. Whether by plunging us into darkness or hiding behind her mouldy wall, she always manages to disappear only to reappear transformed into a different version of herself. In a sequence towards the end of the performance, she walks out in her black furry

⁵⁶ Daubnerová in Adela Vinczeová, *Adela Vinczeová - hosť Sláva Daubnerová*, online video recording, Youtube, 18 Dec 2017, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1FLZER1v2aY>> [11/08/2020]. My translation.

⁵⁷ Vinczeová, 2019.

coat and stands in front of a display of nylons drying on a washing line stretched across the performance space. She moves a piano stool under the drying nylons. Seeing them illuminated from the back, I cannot stop thinking about their uncanny resemblance to used condoms. She takes off her coat to reveal high leather boots and intricate lingerie that once must have looked lush and luxurious, but now looks tattered. She puts the coat on the stool and sits down. Her movement is purposeful and surprisingly non-sexual. She throws the boots to the side carelessly and posing bashfully on the chair she starts turning so the audience can see her from all perspectives.

Throughout the performance, Daubnerová changes her costume several times, but perhaps the most affective one is her nakedness. Theatre critic Soňa Smolková similarly noted that ‘the performance is built through images and so visual aesthetics play the first fiddle.[...] A proof of her genuine struggle for authentic account is her use of nakedness’.⁵⁸ Daubnerová’s use of nakedness is strategic and has been commented on by several critics and interviewers as sensitive. For instance, Adela Vinczeová dedicates much of her interview to questioning why Daubnerová undresses herself on stage. When Daubnerová says that getting naked on stage ‘gives [her] inner strength’ and that ‘it is surprisingly comfortable’, Vinczeová reacts with a surprised ‘no. Really?’.⁵⁹ Vinczeová interviews Daubnerová in the context of talk-shows but her response is telling about popular perception of women’s naked bodies in Slovak art contexts. Smolková’s much more critical review is similarly telling - when she argues that Daubnerová’s ‘use of nakedness [...] doesn’t strike the audience as exhibitionistic or as a need to capture their attention’.⁶⁰ Similarly to Vinczeová, Smolková reacts to how Daubnerová’s naked body is supposedly perceived in the context of masculinist spectatorship within Slovak theatre. ‘She elevates her nakedness to a costume’, Smolková continues her argument.⁶¹ Daubnerová’s use of her naked body is strategic and engages the audience in a mode of spectatorship that is uniquely feminist. By presenting her naked body on stage and by denying sexualisation of her body through her intricate choreography and non-sexualised purposeful movement, Daubnerová challenges me as an audience member to consider her inner dialogue with Woodman. When Daubnerová creates

⁵⁸ Soňa Smolková, ‘Smutná nahá fotografka’ in *Pravda*, 05 March 2013, [‘A Sad Naked Photographer’]. My translation.

⁵⁹ Vinczeová, 2019.

⁶⁰ Smolková.

⁶¹ Smolková.

an image which suggests sexualised contexts by wearing tattered lingerie, high leather boots and posing under her nylons that resemble used condoms, she could easily disappear as a mere object. Her choreography, her sense of purpose and her denial of sexualisation, however, asks her audience to disregard the sexual context of the image she set up and instead notice her.

The lights go off again as the words ‘a woman, a mirror -- a woman is a mirror for a man’ get projected on the screen. While we are focusing on the words, Daubnerová disappears again and I find my eyes darting around the room, looking for her. I feel strange about this quote from Woodman. After all, I am a man, Daubnerová is a woman, as was Woodman, and watching *Untitled* I am acutely aware of the friction inside of me that that causes. Especially when attempting to write about Daubnerová critically as a feminist from a position of allyship, but also a position that could just as easily be misconstrued as mansplaining. When the quote comes up, I cringe on the inside, because throughout the performance, Daubnerová has been challenging my preconceptions about her as a performer as well as a woman, she has kept on disappearing and reappearing, each re-appearance more exciting than the last. Throughout the performance, she has turned Woodman’s enquiry about disappearance into her own. Daubnerová’s performance made me conscious of her insistence on reappearing, on staying visible, on refusing to leave forever, on asserting her individual identity, and on our relationship as a man and a woman and as a performer and a spectator.

In the series of photographs Daubnerová references, Woodman squeezes her body between a mirror and a sheet of glass, trying to project parts of her body into the 2D plane like a photograph would. According to Bronfen, in ‘*A Woman. A Mirror. A Woman is a Mirror for a Man*’ Woodman carries to an extreme art history’s conventional reduction of the female body to a sight meant to give pleasure to an outside viewer’.⁶² Bronfen argues that Woodman conceived of the photographic series as an ironic reference to male encoded gaze within visual arts. Daubnerová seems to use the title similarly, but while previous references to titles of Woodman’s works saw Daubnerová reimagining the images and the process behind them, the final sequence of *Untitled* was Daubnerová’s own commentary. Although during most of the performance the border between where Daubnerová began and Woodman ended was blurry, the end of the performance seemed to be Daubnerová’s own

⁶² Bronfen, 19.

creation. In the final cycle of appearance and disappearance, Daubnerová enters the stage wearing a white pullover, black nylons and inconspicuous black kitten heels. With her chest on the floor, she explores the spaces with her legs and feet. Šimková described this section as Daubnerová ‘opening up, spreading her thighs in black underwear like a wide embrace. Only so that she can get up again and go from the front of the stage to the back panel/screen. She carefully inserts herself into a hole in the screen’.⁶³ The lights turn on and off and the audience sees Daubnerová disappear more and more into the hole until only her ankle is left. When the lights turn off one more time, they do not turn on again until after the performance has ended. In regards to Woodman’s *a woman a mirror - a woman is a mirror for a man*, Bronfen argues that ‘each of these pictures troubles an economy of the gaze that puts the female body on display so as to offer visual pleasure to a male observer’.⁶⁴ Woodman ironically subverts male gaze upon itself tries to imagine herself as an object to be enjoyed by the spectator, but through her continuous movements and seriality of her photographs she avoids being subsumed into a single static image. Daubnerová builds up the idea of objectification throughout her performance through the way she moves her body, choices of costumes and contextualisation of scenes, but in all moments she questions whether she can be understood as visually pleasurable to a male observer.

Through Woodman’s work, Daubnerová investigated her own experience as a woman and an artist in the context of Slovak performance. Although performing Woodman’s photographs, Daubnerová extends Woodman’s exploration into disappearance. While Woodman wants to disappear despite being the central focus point of her work, Daubnerová wants to remain visible despite performing Woodman’s investigation. Through the symbolic gender experience of Woodman’s oeuvre and its focus on death and disappearance, the individual gender experience of Daubnerová and its investigation into subject/object paradigm, and by challenging the structural preconceptions about gender experience by provoking feminist spectatorship, Daubnerová presents her experience as a performer who is structurally asked to disappear, but refuses to do so.

⁶³ Šimková, 17.

⁶⁴ Bronfen, 19.

Daubnerová's ankle disappears in darkness. In the final moments of the performance, there is nothing but darkness, repetitive sounds of piano and a noise oscillating between loud and soft low notes. For about a minute but what feels like an eternity, I am waiting to see Daubnerová reappear again and begin her cycle of performing Woodman's photographs again. The music eventually stops and for a couple of excruciatingly endless seconds, the rest of the audience is waiting with me to repeat our game of hide and seek with the performer. The lights go on and a first person starts clapping timidly. In the final moments of the performance, Daubnerová broke the border between Woodman and herself and was performing as herself. She walks on stage again wearing the same costume as in the first scene of the performance to take a single bow. *Perhaps it was never about Woodman*, I was wondering as I was about to leave the theatre. *Perhaps it was only about Daubnerová*.

2. Mutual Terrors: Community and Outsidership in *Solo Lamentoso* (2015)

In a loud racket of newscaster reports and an opera aria, I try, and fail, to figure out what any of the voices are trying to say.⁶⁵ The noise ends abruptly and Daubnerová, softly illuminated by a light behind a translucent white curtain, moves frantically as whispered voices start describing a person who was not a man nor a woman but a monster. Like most people from Slovakia, I was vaguely aware of the story of the Singing House from Štúrovo and its occupant Eva N. From the urban legends, tabloids and TV, I knew of the bizarre woman who moved to a residential area in the town of Štúrovo and after a while started terrorizing its citizens by blasting loud opera arias at dangerous volumes every day from early morning to late at night. The citizens of Štúrovo contacted the officials several times, asked the police, the prime minister, and even the president for help. Their efforts were fruitless, however, and the woman kept on blasting her music for 14 years until one day she simply stopped for no apparent reason. In *Solo Lamentoso*, Daubnerová reframes the story of the Singing House by giving Eva N. a voice and a chance to tell her side of the story. Leaving the performance, I found my views had shifted and I empathised with the woman I was prepared to hate when I had come to see the performance. Daubnerová's performance asked questions about what the value of something as relative as truth is and whose responsibility it is to give everyone a chance to speak.

Solo Lamentoso was the first performance in which Daubnerová shifted her focus from personal exploration of gender identity to an interrogation of structural bias towards women in Slovak society. Prior to this performance, Daubnerová explored her identity by positioning herself within stories of other woman artists; in *Solo Lamentoso*, however, she positions herself within the story of an (extra-)ordinary woman whose experience and representation was moulded by her tense relationship with her local community. Due to the particular social make-up of Štúrovo as well as Eva N.'s class, *Solo Lamentoso* explores how class, nationality

⁶⁵ Analysis of *Solo Lamentoso* is based on a live performance as well as archival materials. *Solo Lamentoso*, perf. by Slava Daubnerová, Rich Mix, 4 November 2019
Solo Lamentoso, perf. by Slava Daubnerová, December 2015 in MM/3054, Audiovisual Archive, Videotéka, Divadelný Ústav Bratislava.

and identity intersect with the perception of women in the context of Slovakia. Additionally, Daubnerová interrogates the motives behind the community's hatred towards Eva N. as an outsider and asks in what ways and with what effects was the local community using gender signifiers as enablers of hate towards her, and why Eva N. was not given the platform to tell her side of the story.

While *Untitled* was devised from and inspired by Francesca Woodman's photography, *Solo Lamentoso* is devised from sound recordings of TV news reports, blog posts, interviews with Eva N. and the local community, official documents or open letters to officials. If *Untitled* was an exploration of performance and photography, *Solo Lamentoso* is an exploration of performance and sound design. Before we see the performer, we can hear an opera aria and the very well recognisable voices of Slovak TV newscasters mixed in an unintelligible cacophony. The audience is then plunged into silence and darkness, the only source of light is the lit-up windows of little cardboard houses set around the performance space. A menacing sound of wind starts to rise in volume and a woman's voice whispers, 'she did it out of revenge'.⁶⁶ A light in the back of the stage turns on and we can see Daubnerová moving violently behind a white curtain. The lights turn off again and the voice whispers 'She was dressing up as a man. Even she doesn't know what she is' and we see Daubnerová stooped jumping around with her legs far apart. 'She locked her own father into a pig shed' the voice mutters again and Daubnerová runs animalistically across the stage. Daubnerová's actions in the first sequence are carefully choreographed reactions to the speech. In this section of the performance, she responds to speech acts by performing them. She takes the whispers as performative utterances that create meanings and a reality simply through words. The story of the Singing House originally spread as an urban legend - a story created and upheld through speech and repetition. Performance scholar Miroslav Ballay defines performativity as 'a unique signifying situation. The site of such performativity within the cultural field undoubtedly occupies a unique communication paradigm in which someone/something becomes something else within a specific action or event'.⁶⁷ Ballay understands performativity in the context of performance as an act that creates something but is something else than the act itself. In terms of speech, the act of speaking creates a

⁶⁶ All translations from *Solo Lamentoso* are mine.

⁶⁷ Miroslav Ballay, 'Reflexia performatívnosti súčasnej kultúry in *Culturologica Slovaca*, Vol. 1, Issue 1, (2016), 16, ['Reflection on Performativity of Contemporary Culture']. My translation.

reality - when a whisper in *Solo Lamentoso* announces that 'she doesn't know what she is' and attacks her gender signifiers, Daubnerová moves aggressively to embody toxic masculinity signifiers prompted by the speech act. She allows the rumours to become tangible through the performative potential of the utterances and then performs the reality they create. The story of the Singing House is, after all, a story told through sound and *Solo Lamentoso* reflects that in its dramaturgy.

Daubnerová's sound design and choreography serve as a political commentary on revenge, tensions between an individual and a community, and between one woman and public attitude. In this chapter, I analyse *Solo Lamentoso* in terms of the symbolic gender of the original story of Eva N. and the Singing House, the individual gender experience of Daubnerová's identity and artistic practice, and the structural gender of audience spectatorship and public reception, as proposed by Iveta Škripková. While *Untitled* was predominantly a personal exploration of gender experience for Daubnerová, *Solo Lamentoso* is an interrogation of systemic and structural scepticism towards women's point of view in conflicts within communities. As performance critic Katarína Cvečková argues, '*Solo Lamentoso* is about an (extra-)ordinary woman, who fought alone against an entire town for 14 years. [...] It explores this uneven war and exposes the bizarreness of a situation in which a petty fight extremely quickly grows into mutual terror'.⁶⁸ Cvečková argues that the story is not exclusively intimate as it was in Daubnerová's previous projects, but instead closely examines social structures that are responsible for oppression of women within smaller communities.

Symbolic Gender: Holy Vengeance Boils in Hearts

Daubnerová strategically arranges quotes and recordings from TV news recordings, interviews with local citizens as well as verbatim recordings of interviews with Eva N., and her blog posts in order to create a relatively balanced and ambiguous commentary on social biases within community squabbles in *Solo Lamentoso*.⁶⁹ Daubnerová's staging is designed to

⁶⁸ Katarína Cvečková, 'Sólo Slávy Daubnerovej pre Evu N.' in *konkrétne o divadle*, 2016, issue 4, (April 2016), 12-13. ['Sláva Daubnerová's Solo for Eva N.' in *specifically about theatre*]. My translation.

⁶⁹ Other than news recordings, Daubnerová worked with voice actors to reproduce her interviews and media's interviews with both Eva N. and the local community. In a conversation after the performance, she told me that

guide the audience through different perspectives of the story. The stage is divided by a see-through white curtain creating one performance space in front of the curtain and one space behind. Throughout the performance, Daubnerová uses these two performance spaces as a metaphor for outsidership and shifting points of view. In the opening part of the performance, there are several houses in front of the curtain and Daubnerová is positioned behind it. The audience is first introduced to the story many Slovak people will have known well from the media - a story of a mentally ill woman who moved to a quiet and respectful community in the city of Štúrovo with the sole purpose of terrorizing them. The performance, however, quickly changes tone as the houses get positioned behind the curtain and Daubnerová performs in front of it.

As Daubnerová starts moving houses around the stage, we hear Eva N. tell us about how she moved to a big modern house in Košútová street in Štúrovo in 1999 after she made a fortune as a businesswoman. By now, Daubnerová has moved all the houses behind the curtain and started setting up a cosy home atmosphere in front of it. She brings a vintage red rocking chair, a red carpet, a small table with a houseplant and a red rotary phone. We hear Eva N. explain how soon after she moved to her new home, she started experiencing headaches due to the constant barking of her neighbour's dog. Initially, she tried to talk to her neighbour and ask her to leave the dog inside of the house or the other side of her estate where Eva N. could not hear the dog, especially early in the morning and late at night. Her neighbour responded only with 'that's what dogs are for: to bark'.⁷⁰ Dog barking mixes with Eva N.'s confession and Daubnerová covers her ears with her hands while rocking in the chair. As her rocking motion builds up, she is thrown on her feet by the momentum and a loud siren mixed with a cacophony of growling and barking dogs permeates the space. Daubnerová's sound design is jarring and made me feel inexplicably anxious while watching the performance. The sound editing and Daubnerová's intricate choreography is strategically deployed to allow the audience to establish visceral reactions and subtly invite them to sympathise with Eva N. As Daubnerová settles back in the chair, Eva N. continues: 'I went to the council to ask whether there is a directive that could solve this situation. But they said

she did so to protect the identities of the local community members. Additionally, re-recordings allowed her to manipulate the voices to create a secondary layer of meanings, by strategically changing the tone of speech such as whispers and rumours in the first part of the performance. Slava Daubnerová, informal interview with the author, London, 4 Nov 2019.

⁷⁰ *Solo Lamentoso*.

that there isn't. They did give me advice, though: to listen to the radio so I don't hear the dog as much'.⁷¹ The official advice ended up exacerbating the relationship between Eva N. and the local community for the next 14 years. The lights go off and an official-sounding male voice announces: 'the first year of music'.⁷²

Solo Lamentoso is divided into 15 parts. In the first part, which serves as a prologue, Daubnerová introduces both the perspective of Eva N. and the local community. Each subsequent part represents a year of the mutual feud, until year 14, during which Eva N. eventually turned the music off. The first year opens with Eva N.'s monologue about following the official advice to listen to the radio. In the beginning of the feud, Eva N. was only listening to a Hungarian classical music radio station Bartók from a small device in her home, but her neighbours complained about it being too loud. On several occasions, they threw rocks at her windows, stole her trash bins, or broke the gates to her estate.⁷³ Only later on in the first year did Eva N. decide to install speakers on the top of her house, creating a track in which Plácido Domingo's *Di Quella Pira* was manipulated and mixed with other works of classical music, high pitched noises and a fire alarm on a loop. During the 14 years, Eva N. and her neighbours terrorized each other and despite public pleas from the community, open letters to the government, petitions, or court mandated psychoanalysis, Eva N.'s behaviour was within the constraints of the law and it was concluded she was not mentally ill. Cvečková similarly reports that Eva N. played the music 'always from 6AM to 10PM loudly enough for the whole neighbourhood to hear, but still within legal restrictions. Her neighbours took vengeance back at her in the end, the whole time they were making her life more difficult - both through official and lowly means'.⁷⁴ When Eva N. decides to fight back, Daubnerová summons the earlier image of rocking on the chair, but this time by standing with one leg at the top of the headrest and the other on the bottom cushion. She transforms the earlier moment of weakness into an act of empowerment. Standing triumphantly, she rocks the chair again from gentle quivers to violent swings while *the Ride of the Valkyries* rises in its crescendos.

⁷¹ *Solo Lamentoso*.

⁷² *Solo Lamentoso*.

⁷³ Eva N. documents damages to her house, police reports and insurance claims on her blog. Eva Nothartová, *Párkány Kossuth utca és környéke lakói 3.*, personal blog, Blogspot, undated, <https://noharteva.blogspot.com/p/blog-page_7423.html> [accessed 04/08/2020].

⁷⁴ Cvečková, 14.

The symbolic gender experience of Eva N.'s struggle with her local community was moulded by mutual terror. Through Daubnerová's choreography and dramaturgy of sound recordings, the audience is privy to a story of a woman whose wellbeing was dismissed for the supposed greater good of the community. The neighbour's responses such as rumours that she dresses like a man, she did not know what she was, as well as calling her crazy - using the popular trope of 'Žena hysterka' (hysterical woman) - shows how her local community weaponized gender signifiers and remnants of gender essentialist thinking from the socialist Czechoslovakia to dehumanize her.⁷⁵ Daubnerová, however, subverts this popular story by giving Eva N. a chance to respond. Cvečková argues that Daubnerová allows 'the audience to be behind the curtain, to look on the inside - to become an observer of her version of the story. By using transformative movement, [Eva N.] is changed from an inhumane monstrosity that her neighbours were describing to a delicate woman backed into the corner of her own home'.⁷⁶

Individual Gender: Hiding Centre Stage

In *Solo Lamentoso*, Daubnerová continues her inquiry into performativity of gender through visual signifiers and movement. Questions about representation and performativity of gender are deeply embedded in the local community's approach to Eva N. According to Slovak dramaturg Milan Zvada, performativity is 'a repetition of learnt actions and behaviours - social roles within specific situations, in relation to particular socio-cultural contexts, conventions, or gender'.⁷⁷ Ballay similarly argues that performativity of gender within performance is based on 'presentational/presented potential [equivalent to signifier/signified paradigm] with a possibility of scenic representation of human activity with a corresponding signifier set-up'.⁷⁸ Zvada and Ballay understand gender performativity within performance as representation of learnt signifiers and behaviours. The material of

⁷⁵ The beginning of the actual story is only 6 years after the dissolution of the Czechoslovak socialist regime. Consequently, Slovakia's scepticism both towards capitalism and feminism that was a result of ideological indoctrination was still prevalent in Slovak culture.

⁷⁶ Cvečková, 15.

⁷⁷ Milan Zvada, 'Performance studies: divadlo ako predmet prax a poznanie' in *Javisko*, Vol 45, Issue 1, (2013), 34 ['Performance Studies: Theatre as an Object, Practice and Knowledge']. My translation.

⁷⁸ Ballay, 18.

Solo Lamentoso and the interviews with the local community lend itself to Daubnerová's inquiry into gender. After all, the second sentence the audience hears is from an interview with Eva N.'s neighbour saying 'she was dressing up as a man' followed by Daubnerová's aggressive choreography in which she resembles a monster-like figure. The local community was using gender signifiers as an *ad hominem* fallacy but Daubnerová's dramaturgy, her staging and costuming in a sheer white flowy nightgown suggests this attack is less personal and more structural. When she jumps and dances around the stage to the whispers mocking Eva N., she is acting as herself, battling against the biases, silencing and dismissal she has experienced as a solo woman performance artist within theatre culture in Slovakia.

Daubnerová complicates this early in the performance during the transition between the point of view of the community and Eva N.'s personal point of view. A lullaby starts playing and Daubnerová crawls across the stage hidden in a cardboard model of Eva N.'s house. She lifts the back of the house and, wearing glittery gold high heels, she extends her legs out of the back of the house. She then pokes her head out of the front and carries the house on her back like a snail as she continues crawling through the stage. She hides in the house again and stands up so only her legs and her heels are sticking out from the bottom of the house. She falls clumsily, sets the house on the stage and hides behind it. This sequence is a subtle reference to Louise Bourgeois's *Femme Maison* series in which Bourgeois created paintings and sculptures with parts of women bodies replaced by houses. The title *Femme Maison* means housewife but also translates literally as "woman house". In Bourgeois's work, a woman fuses with the house, which Bourgeois suggests is a place that a woman is contained to by society and her role is equated with that of a housewife. Daubnerová used the same image in her performance *Cells* (2006) in which she explored her identity in the context of Bourgeois's oeuvre. In a program note for *Cells*, Daubnerová wrote that the key to her understanding of Bourgeois's work was 'the concept of understanding cells as isolated fields'.⁷⁹ By recreating *Femme Maison* in *Solo Lamentoso*, Daubnerová conjures the contexts from *Cells* in which she represents her isolation as a woman artist within Slovak art culture as well as structural isolation of women by their communities. Eva N. was dismissed and backed into the corner of her house by her local community to a large extent because of what she represented. Her house was out of place on the street since it was bigger and more modern than other ones at the time, she was an unmarried woman without children living

⁷⁹ Slava Daubnerová, *Cely*, program note. [*Cells*]

alone in a community of families that have lived in the area for generations, and she was a self-made businesswoman in a culture that still was at the time sceptical of capitalism.⁸⁰ For the local community, Eva N. and her relatively lavish house represented an ideal of a Western woman who could have it all and was branded as an outsider by her local community due to the intersection of her gender and higher class in the relatively lower-class area. By referencing Daubnerová's earlier work about Bourgeois's oeuvre, Daubnerová continues in her criticism of systemic isolation of women and their dismissal based on gender in Slovakia. Cvečková observes that when Daubnerová 'puts on the miniature house and covers up her upper body it is as if Eva N., Daubnerová and the house fused into one'.⁸¹ It is at the moments when Daubnerová covers herself that her politics paradoxically become more visible. Soňa Šimková wrote that Daubnerová's work makes us question '[w]hy she cocoons herself into [other people's] stories, how hiding within them allows her to access and present her authentic self, and what art means to her on an existential level'.⁸² By hiding herself, Daubnerová presents and explores her art and identity. It is the moments when Daubnerová seemingly disappears that are the most politically effective and paradoxically make her more visible. When towards the beginning of the performance she disappears within the house, she criticizes silencing of women based on their gender and their confinement as housewives.

Towards the end of the performance, Daubnerová disappears from the scene one more time. 'Half a year without music' a voice announces and the audience hears Eva N.'s final confession. Throughout the performance Daubnerová moves together with Eva N. by trying to find a balance between the supposedly objective truth of the community and Eva N.'s subjective truth. Daubnerová's performance style, however, is non-emotional, her face does not betray her position towards the story and her choreography balances both the community and Eva N. as equally the victims and the instigators of the conflict in different parts of the performance. Performance critic Zuzana Šnircová summed up Daubnerová's style as 'sensitive but purposeful'.⁸³ In the final scene, Daubnerová is hidden behind the curtain and the audience hears Eva N.'s vengeful confession. Šnircová argues that by the end

⁸⁰ The word 'buržuj', meaning bourgeois, is still used as a pejorative term for a rich person. It is a cultural remnant of the socialist regime.

⁸¹ Cvečková, 15.

⁸² Šimková, 17.

⁸³ Zuzana Šnircová, 'Solo lamentoso alebo Boh osobnej pomsty' in *MLOKI*, ['Solo Lamentoso or the God of Personal Revenge'] (August 2016), <<http://www.mloki.sk/node/554>> [accessed 06/08/202]. My translation.

of the performance Eva N.'s story had moved through 'despair, misery, rage to apathy' and everything she had left was vengeance.⁸⁴ A soft spotlight lightly illuminates the cardboard cut-out of Eva N.'s house as the audience listens to a long monologue about Eva N.'s hate of the citizens of Štúrovo. 'You can only reach my level if for over 20 years you can buy stock, serve customers, arrange bank transfers, do your own accounting, ride your car so that you wouldn't make even the smallest mistake, and only when you have as many assets, as much real estate and as much money as I do. Until then you are nothing but the citizens of Štúrovo', Eva N. announces in a final spur of rage.⁸⁵ Mozart's *Der Hölle Rache kocht in meinem Herzen* starts playing and Daubnerová re-enters the stage by pulling apart the curtains decisively. She is wearing a black blazer, black nylons, black high-heels, and a black wide brim hat. Only her bright red lips are visible as she starts lip syncing the well-known aria. Daubnerová's performance of the aria as the final scene felt strangely disconnected from the rest of the performance but in a way that productively and strategically allowed Daubnerová to present her position towards the story. Sitting in the audience, there was no doubt in my mind that what I was witnessing was Daubnerová's take-away from the story of the Singing House. She was embodying a woman who was powerful, who would not give up on her rights to protect her own property and life, who would fight her own battles, who would not compromise on her values due to the pressure of the community, and a woman who would own her womanhood alongside the cultural attacks on her gender presentation by society. In the final moments of the performance, Daubnerová distances herself from Eva N.'s story and deploys it to create a platform upon which a conversation about discrimination based on gender can be had.

Structural Gender: Class, Nationality and Materialism

Solo Lamentoso is Daubnerová's eloquent critique of discrimination based on gender. It is not, however, doing so self-righteously but tries to uncover how an improper conduct within a debate about non-dominant narratives can exacerbate interpersonal relationships. Throughout the performance, Daubnerová asks the audience to reconsider their

⁸⁴ Šnircová.

⁸⁵ *Solo Lamentoso*.

preconceptions several times. Sitting down in the audience in the beginning, I was ready to be on the side of the local community. I had heard this story from TV newscasters and read it in tabloids many times as it developed between 2008 and 2014. When I went to see the performance in 2019, my knowledge of the story, similarly to many people in Slovakia that have followed it as cursorily as I have, was this: Eva N. was a mentally ill woman who was terrorizing her neighbours for no reason for 14 years by playing music at unreasonably high volume. Daubnerová's exploration is, however, significantly muddier than that. Through Daubnerová's performance, I was invited to reconsider Eva N.'s story as a story of a woman who was discriminated against due to the cultural and social expectations that were left-over in Slovak culture after the dissolution of the socialist regime. Daubnerová portrayed Eva N. as a woman who was merely defending herself against attacks that were done to her because of the intersection of her gender and class. To complicate it even further, Štúrovo is a town on the Slovak side of the border with Hungary and 68% of Štúrovo, including Eva N., self-identify as Hungarian.⁸⁶ Due to the particular history of Slovakia and Hungary⁸⁷ as well as Hungarian pressure to Hungarianise the south of Slovakia at the time,⁸⁸ both popular media such as TV Markíza and TV JOJ as well as serious newspapers such as SME, Pravda or Topky were quick to criticize Hungarian-identifying citizens in the south of Slovakia. While Eva N. was not victimized in her community due to her nationality, she was victimized by the media due to the intersectionality of her gender, class and her Hungarian self-identification.

Sitting in the audience, watching the story unfold, listening to the voices of Slovak citizens and watching Daubnerová's intricate choreography, I was compelled to reconsider my stance towards Eva N. and Daubnerová. Daubnerová's deconstruction of the story made it apparent to me that my judgement of Eva N.'s story was moulded by the media, which presented her situation from the side of the citizens due to the complex political situation in

⁸⁶ Július Hanus, *Program hospodárskeho a sociálneho rozvoja mesta Štúrovo*, [Program for Economic and Social Growth of the town of Štúrovo], (Aurex, 2008), 10, <https://www.sturovo.sk/download_file_f.php?id=64715> [accessed 06/08/2020].

⁸⁷ Slovakia was a part of the Hungarian Empire and later Austria-Hungary until 1918. During the Treaty of Versailles, Czechoslovakia was given its own sovereign land. At the time, Hungary appealed to the League of Nations for breaking the right of self-determination in the case of Czechoslovak towns such as Štúrovo and requested their land back.

⁸⁸ Prime Minister Igor Matovič, for instance, criticized Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán for intervening in the national make-up of Slovakia by 'giving away [Hungarian] citizenships to citizens living in Slovakia, which is a sovereign country, and by doing so intervene into interior affairs'. Igor Matovič in 'Matovič: Náš nepriateľ nie je slovenský Maďar, ale Orbán' in *Topky*, 27 Dec 2011, ['Our Enemy Isn't Slovak Hungarians but Orbán'], <<https://www.topky.sk/cl/100535/1294544/Matovic--Nas-nepriatel-nie-je-slovensky-Madar--ale-Orban>> [accessed 06/08/2020]. My translation.

Slovakia at the time. The local community, in turn, was compelled to their actions and stance by years of political and social indoctrination against powerful women, feminism and capitalist sensibilities during the socialist regime. They provoked Eva N. to a reaction that was perhaps out of proportion but was also understandable. Daubnerová does not try to defend Eva N.'s actions but instead deploys the story to create a platform for discussion about the relativity of truth in community disputes and the preconceptions that benefit some, in this case the local community, and hurt others, Eva N. in this case. Daubnerová defined the performance's core topic as an exploration of 'a lonely battle between an individual and the entire society'.⁸⁹ The theme of dismissal, silencing and disappearance is a running theme throughout Daubnerová's work and is always subtly framed in terms of feminist discussion, since she uses stories of other women and her body to explore these themes.

Through her movement, performance materials, and strategically subtle dramaturgical choices about genders roles, Daubnerová invited me to consider the performance as a feminist spectator. By portraying Eva N.'s struggle as contingent on her class, identity as a woman, and as a Hungarian Slovak national, Daubnerová invites the audience to see the performance from the point of view of materialist feminism. In *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, Jill Dolan outlines materialist feminism as one of the dominant feminisms within performance spectatorship. According to Dolan, 'materialist feminism deconstructs the mythic subject Woman [sic] to look at women as a class oppressed by material conditions and social relations'.⁹⁰ Materialist feminism foregrounds patriarchy and capitalism as the main site of women's oppression contingent on historical and socio-cultural contexts. Dolan argues that 'in materialist discourse, [gender] is dictated through enculturation, as gender divisions are placed at the service of the dominant culture's ideology'.⁹¹ Dolan writes in the context of American performance, where the dominant ideology is a capitalist one. In Slovakia, however, the dominant cultural ideology remains a communist one that was influencing Slovak socio-political sensibilities from 1945-1993.⁹² While in Anglo-American contexts it is capitalism that locks women into gender roles as housewives and mothers, in

⁸⁹ *Solo Lamentoso*, program note.

⁹⁰ Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 10.

⁹¹ Dolan, 10.

⁹² Politics from the socialist regime is still tangible in Slovak social and cultural policies. In the brief history of Slovak republic, 5 out of 7 prime ministers were socialist.

the context of Slovakia it is communism that forces women to be housewives and mothers alongside their careers. Rusnákova similarly comments that the communist regime

did officially declare female emancipation but it was merely an ideological mystification. [...]In terms of art, it translated into a model of a universal human represented mainly by a man. This model affirmed patriarchal stereotypes that portrayed men and women in classic roles within traditional iconographic schemes. In this sense, we could generalise that while on one hand the man's domain is work, self-realisation and the public sector, on the other hand the woman's domain is first and foremost taking care of the family and the household.⁹³

Rusnákova argues that it is due to communist policies that women in Slovakia are forced into gendered roles. This is not a criticism of Slovak politics, Slovak people, or communism as an ideology, movement, or method. Instead, I suggest that in the socio-cultural and historical context of Slovakia, the predominant structures that Dolan identifies as oppressive towards women are considered communist structures in Slovakia due to Slovakia's particular historical contingency as opposed to capitalist structures contingent on Anglo-American history, as Dolan argues. Daubnerová challenges these oppressive pre-conceptions throughout the performance by placing the spotlight upon Štúrovo's local community's motives behind their discrimination of Eva N. One of Eva N.'s neighbours criticized her lavish house, another that she is not married and without children, and another that she is a successful businesswoman. Their caricaturizing of Eva N. is in Daubnerová's performance caused by the learnt schemas taught as a cultural remnant of the communist regime and was as gendered as it was class-based. While watching the performance, Daubnerová invited me to consider Eva N.'s oppression critically in terms of materialist feminist spectatorship as a woman whose experience is moulded by the many intersections of her identity. She did so without taking a stance herself - her push towards materialist spectatorship was subtle, gentle and effective; the story of the relative truth in a battle between a lonely woman and society lends itself to it. As Cvečková argues, Daubnerová created a site upon which her audience can examine oppression of women as historically and socio-culturally contingent

⁹³ Rusnákova, 7.

upon the material conditions within which Eva N.: ‘by portraying [Eva N.] in a humane light - [Daubnerová] carved a lonely suffering woman out of a monster. And *Solo Lamentoso* is her plea’.⁹⁴

Solo Lamentoso was Daubnerová’s first performance about a non-artist woman. Through the story of Eva N., Daubnerová investigated structural oppression of women and asked the audience to examine it closely with her under a spotlight. The story of Eva N. was well-known to most of her Slovak audiences and many people, including me, started the conversation on the side of the local community. Daubnerová’s performance, however, forced me to re-think my stance, to re-consider the cultural biases I was not aware I had about Eva N.’s story, and invited me to judge her kindly. While sitting in the audience, I found myself judging myself for having created an opinion of Eva N. that now, with the benefit of hindsight, seems frivolous and misguided.

After the performance, I helped Daubnerová pack up the set. While helping her take apart the cardboard boxes that she used as houses for her performance, I found myself saying: “That was a crazy story, wasn’t it!”

“Yes, crazy in a way.” I knew what she meant. It was bizarre but in a way that was completely different to what I had expected.

“So, is that it? Is the story over?”, I asked.

“No,” she replied with a soft laugh, “She started playing the music again shortly after I did the performance for the first time. Sometimes I wonder whether I had anything to do with it,” and after a pause she added: “I don’t think it will be fully over anytime soon.”

And I wondered whether she meant this feud in particular, or women’s oppression as a whole.

⁹⁴ Cvečková, 17.

Conclusion

When Britney Spears shaved her head in 2007, I was in my early teens, living in Slovakia and I am ashamed to admit I thought it was hilarious. The whole breakdown was presented to me in the spirit of ‘women be crazy’ and as an impressionable young boy, I did genuinely believe that women do be crazy. At least that’s what Britney Spears’ breakdown suggested. I talked about it with my classmates, my teachers, my parents, and the overwhelming explanation I received was always in hushed tones and along the lines of weakness and mental instability due to women’s biology and hormones. With the benefit of hindsight, however, I am sceptical about such a reading of Spears’ breakdown.

Daubnerová started creating biographical performances that focus on often overlooked or misunderstood women a year before Spears’ breakdown in a culture that was dismissive towards women’s struggles. Daubnerová’s practice is heavily based on archival and interview-based research and seems to speak directly to the structural and social standing of women in Slovak society. Her performances are permeated with feminist politics, but due to Slovakia’s scepticism towards feminism as a word, she does not identify her work as such. After all, the same culture that taught me that Spears’ breakdown was caused by her gender is the culture on and against which Daubnerová started creating her performances. Daubnerová’s work challenges preconceptions about the role of women in Slovak society and complicates their identity by portraying them in their complexity.

Daubnerová’s work seems to circle around a central topic of disappearance. In *Untitled*, she explored women’s disappearance within the art world and her own disappearance as a woman performer in the context of Slovak theatre culture through the story of Francesca Woodman. In her photos, Woodman tried to disappear, to blend into the background despite being the main object of her work. By positioning herself within Woodman’s oeuvre, Daubnerová explored her identity as a woman artist *vis-à-vis* individual and symbolic influences upon women’s disappearance. Daubnerová, however, refuses to disappear, she wants to remain visible, and by doing so she challenges her audience to critically reflect upon potential individual cultural biases towards women in Slovakia. In *Solo Lamentoso*, she continues her exploration into female disappearance but while *Untitled*

traces disappearance on a personal and artistic level, *Solo Lamentoso* investigates disappearance as a structural bias that silences women's voices. Throughout the performance, Daubnerová continuously questions why women are not given the opportunity to defend themselves in the public eye, why their voices get silenced, and why it is expected that they should give up their personal well-being for the betterment of the community as a whole. By the end of the performance, she arrives at a point where the audience is invited to consider the structural biases towards women and their interrelation to other identity categories, such as class and nationality. She enables the audience to engage in a materialist feminist mode of spectatorship and ask questions about what is at stake at silencing women's voices.

Daubnerová's performances are strategically subtle, but they are also surprisingly effective. She does not officially align herself with feminist politics, but her work has undeniable feminist effects on both theatre and live art spectators alike. The case of Daubnerová shows how feminist work can operate in a political climate that is unwelcoming and sceptical of feminist works by utilizing subtle strategic dramaturgical choices and carefully shifting from points of view that are impersonal, to personal, to structural. By the end, I find myself sitting in the audience wanting to get up and make some changes - if not in the whole country then definitely in my own morals. Daubnerová's work creates a site for subtle acts of utopian political agency.

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