

“About the Women Commentators Festival (Russia and Ukraine)”

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This year, Women Commentators opened in Królikarnia in Warsaw, bringing together female artists from Russia and Ukraine. The Festival consisted of an exhibition, along with a series of discussions, lectures, workshops and performances that took place during the opening weekend (3-5 October) and a film programme which was organised during the finissage weekend (25-26 October).

Under the project, five Ukrainian and five Russian artists were invited to Warsaw to participate in the vernissage and the Festival's public programme scheduled between 30th of September and 5th of October.

First of all, it is important to note why we invited both Russian and Ukrainian artists and what we expected from this move. For us, assembling artists from the two countries in the state of the war meant to find ways for cultural communication which would go beyond political and social taboos, to make an attempt to force a dialogue, to open up social and political wounds. One can say that it is irrelevant to make this sort of experiments at a moment when real people are being tortured and dying... It is true... However, at the cultural and intellectual level we are not able to defend or save anyone physically, but our agency might have triggered a mutual understanding that went beyond the information that media war threw at us.

Of course, there were a number of exhibitions made in Poland focusing on the Ukrainian context. Women Commentators differed from those exhibitions. We dared to test the borders of political correctness in many ways. We deliberately represented multiple points of view on the Ukrainian conflict, which do not necessarily follow the common understanding of the situation from the Polish perspective.

Women Commentators thus went beyond being another exhibition mourning Ukraine, or representing heroic Maidan. It was not a romantic or epic glorification of the past events. It was a project which intervened into the pertinent reality, at the moment when the critical, historical distance wasn't (yet) achievable.

For instance, contradictory and unconventional point of view of the Ukrainian cultural analyst Liza Babenko raised a lot of discussions which I see as a necessary input into the understanding of the structure of Ukraine as a heterogeneous country – in terms of history, society, language, culture and politics. The discussion entitled “Pros and cons of rape. Post-colonial syndrome. ‘Colonialism’ in contemporary understanding, its potential within the frame of interpretation in politics, geography, and culture” with the participation of Liza Babenko, Agnieszka Morawińska, Małgorzata Jacyno, and moderated by Tomasz Stryjek, elaborated on this problem.

Further, the debate “David and Goliath. The art of fighting the giants. What is the role of culture in the times of upheavals? Subversive strategies, their impacts and consequences” with Katarzyna Kozyra, Agata Czarnacka, Jan Śpiewak, moderated by Anna Łazar, focused on our role as cultural practitioners in the period of political upheavals.

However, the most exciting was the discussion entitled “They live! Looking for reality through contemporary media”, where Aleksandra Karasińska antagonised Agnieszka Wołk-Łaniewska on the concept of delivering media information to the public. The participation of Michał Przymusiński and Marek Troszyński made the discussion even more captivating.

The last discussion had a subversive title “To Kill a Dragon. Notes about personal and civil freedom. Can we understand a bit more about what really happens in Ukraine?” For many reasons holding this debate as planned did not seem to be possible, as the topic was too fresh to analyse and it was too early to leave out emotions and to discuss for most of the Ukrainian participants. In practice, it turned out that we only could agree that the agreement is impossible. When we accepted this situation, we managed to become more sensitive to each other, and finally we started to make the first steps towards finding common language and to share our information and emotions.

To tell the truth, the project was not easy to handle and has still a big potential for reflection, rethinking, elaboration and research. It raised a lot of questions rather than clarified any problematic issues.

All records of the debates, lectures, workshops and performances were presented during the exhibition, which took place till October 26th, 2014.