

Concept Kunsthal Charlottenborg Holbæk Images 2016

Reflection 3

An Age of Our Making

- On Agency and Enacting Citizenship -

Asked about her understanding of, or how she relates to the concept of 'enacting citizenship', the Italian-Australian thinker and philosopher Rosi Braidotti proposed that the act of citizenship is whatever might increase one's capacity to act or intervene in the world. She goes as far as saying that this action, like any productive and creative mode of intervention, even when it might seem negative, for example acts of resistance, protest, even civil disobedience are indeed models of understanding how citizen can be enacted.

In an age of global renegotiation of relations, i.e. a period in which different cultures, religions, philosophies, spaces and histories of peoples from all four corners of the globe are being re- calliberated in an effort to find common ground, it is important to reflect even more on what it means to be, to act, to challenge the concept of citizenship, especially beyond the context of the nation state.

The notion of the nation state, i.e. that cultural, ethnic and geopolitical entity of world order and sovereignty as associated with the 1648 *Treaty of Westphalia*, as modelled and radicalised by nationalist movements and states in Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries and as propagated and exported to other continents in the 20th century brought with it varying concepts of equality under a given law and a civic duty towards a state or government, but also a perfecting of territorialisation, cultural encasing, nationalist and racial tendencies, and furthermore the dependence and reliance of the constituents or citizens to the nation state. The long history of the relationship between individuals and their state from ancient Greek through Roman empires till modern understanding of citizenship has always been characterised by rights and responsibilities. Citizenship was thus understood as a concept of reciprocity, whereby citizens participate in the construction of a community, while the community gives the citizen basic protection. Though nuanced in its understanding or interpretation depending on the specific society and culture in question, the notion of citizenship besides guaranteeing an individual membership of or within a political entity, which brings with it the obligation of political participation, exercising and conformity to certain legal rights, also always entails or symbolises

the idea of exclusion of those who are not or cannot be citizens.

The history of the 20th and 21st century - as it still evolves - despite standing for a history of huge leaps in scientific and technological advancements is at the same time characterised by colossal religious, economic, political and social crisis that have shaped this age until present day. These crisis have mostly led to the alienation of humanity from one another and strained the relationship between individuals and the political entities to which they belong. It is exactly at this juncture that it becomes important to act or enact citizenship. In the aforementioned interview, Braidotti, paraphrasing Hannah Arendt, called the act of citizenship an act of enormous love for the world.

These acts of citizenship, which can take various forms, ranging from constructive, rational and democratic interventions to blasphemous, aggressive, or acts full of rage or disenchantment are at the core of this exhibition project. From a philosophical and sociological point of view, the capacity of individuals or living beings to act in a his/her/ its world is known as agency. This engagement of the being within a social, religious, economic, environmental or political construct might be on purpose or intentional, but could also be involuntary or unconscious from the point of view of the agent. Going beyond the social ontological questions on whether individuals' actions are influenced by the social structures or contexts within which they find themselves, or if their behaviours and actions are determined by their agency, this exhibition project seeks to address both structural, in this case as a sum of many individual voices and agencies, and singular individual acts that in one way or the other frame the enactment of contemporary citizenship, especially in these times of crisis.

Of all the many trajectories of enacting citizenship that can be taken, this exhibition will choose to pursue and investigate only acts around the trajectories of **space politics**.

>> The act of producing space and exercising the politics of space, as space is political as Henri Lefebvre is known to have said, is another possibility to look at how individuals act to construct civil societies. Making a distinction between *espace perçu*, *espace vécu*, *espace rêvé* Henri Lefebvre in *La production de l'espace* – and later in *Espace et Politique* – explained how space is a social and a political product, how it is historically configured as a social formation and a mental construction.

Space, just like citizenship, is inclusive and exclusive, and practises of marginalization can be seen as spatial politics: since the ancient tradition of scapegoating, or the medieval use of keeping out of the walls of the town the sick and “dangerous” people, the outsiders and the non- homogenized persons have always been relegated to a space

pushed out of the public gaze, a space of darkness.

On a concluding note, it is important to see how art can be a tool through which citizenship can be enacted, and how the artist can function as an agent within society. In Braidotti's interview, she gives the example of the feminist, protest punk-rock performance group Pussy Riot as an example. One of the most spectacular cases of artistic intervention as an act of citizenship and citizenship critic will be the Nigerian Afrobeat musician, human rights activist, rebel and pan- Africanist Fela Kuti (1938 – 1997). In his masterpiece *akuna kuna senior brother of perambulator* deconstructs the concept of citizenship withing a post-colonial African and neo- colonial and dictatorial Nigeria. With a fantastic irony Fela sings “to be citizen them must fit kill u”, analysing the sacrifice it takes them to be a nigerian citizen... “They must kill ur mother”, “Burn ur house” etc, while he goes directly into harassment of street vendors by the government, and ridiculing the courts and police. Fela critic the concept of the nation state that doesnt give space for African experience like just selling on the street.

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