

Fragments of Feminine Narratives

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RELATIONS OF RECIPROCITY

Relations of Reciprocity is an audio-visual installation reflecting on the variable experiences of several generations of women in my family. The work consists of a series of sixteen portrait images on paper incorporating printed and drawn elements (digital prints layered with dense drawing interventions) complemented with audio material based on fragments of conversations of six participants in the project, who discuss different life circumstances, personal experiences and challenges they faced.

PORTRAYING GENERATIONS

The Relations of Reciprocity installation (2020) explores the form of the family portrait. It reflects on notions of femininity, processes of re/ construction of female identity and transformations of gender identities through time. All the participants in the project were my close family members: my grandmother, mother, aunt, sister, daughter and me. I found myself gathering them together, asking questions, listening to their stories, making connections and weaving narratives. The conversations even referred to the recollections of my great-grandmother and her life conditions, covering over a century of female microhistories. The experiences ranged from the limited social and educational opportunities of a woman in a large patriarchal rural family in the Adriatic island at the turn of the last century, to a large array of lifestyle options and career opportunities available to a teenage girl in the capital today.

I tried to explore the relational character of identity, how gender roles are formulated in the family circle, and differences in coping with socio-economic and life challenges, resulting in very different life aspirations and accomplishments. Detecting various and at times conflicting understandings of femininity inside the family background, I documented differences in gender performances and diverse practices of doing/

undoing gender through different personal decisions and choices, articulating relations of reciprocity and long-term influences of individual resolutions.

The visual aspect of the installation contains sixteen portraits, each measuring 1000 x 700 mm, conceived as a site-specific installation (see Picture 1). The portraits were developed from photographs taken especially for this project. The photoshoot was organized as a part of a family gathering and the women were relaxed in front of the camera[1].

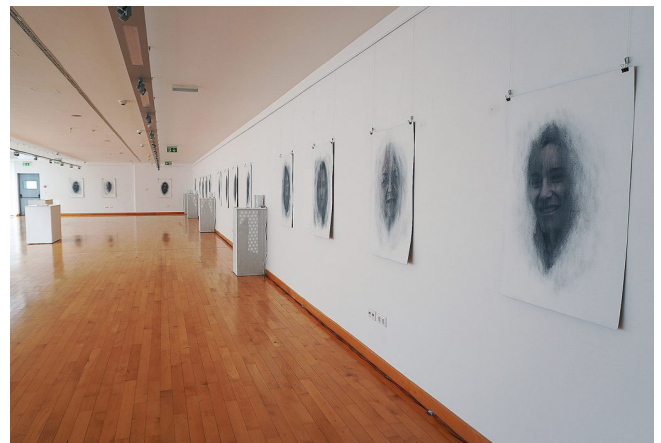


Figure 1



Figure 2

Figure 1. Relations of Reciprocity, (2019) by Ana Vivoda, digital print, acrylic, graphite, exhibition view at the Vasko Lipovac University Gallery, Split 2020

Figure 2. Relations of Reciprocity, detail, (2019) by Ana Vivoda, digital print, acrylic, graphite, 1000 x 700 mm

I prepared the stage, placing participants against a white background, looking straight at the camera, aiming for neutrality, and avoiding all unnecessary elements, sentimentality or idealization, but I didn't interfere in any of the other elements. I photographed the women just as they wanted to be photographed, only noticing afterwards that none was wearing make-up. It wasn't an issue that we had planned, it was just a natural consequence of our relations to our bodies and approach to our appearances.

DIGITAL TACTILITY

Even though the basic printmaking technique is digital print, which has inbuilt potential for digital manipulation, the images were simply printed out in black and white on thick cellulose paper that was pasted to the cardboard base in order to be 'manipulated' in a much more traditional way – using white acrylic and pencil (see Pictures 3 and 4). On the one hand, there is a consistency in the project – both image and sound were digitally processed, but print as a medium was important for other reasons too. Print is a trace, it is a reflection on the inscriptions of previous generations. The women sometimes seem trapped in recurring patterns or repetitive feminine histories akin to the concept of reprinting the matrix with recurring patterns and slightly altered impressions.

Affixing the print to a cardboard base, the paper gains particular tactile quality: it wrinkles at times, layering the print with materiality and texture resembling the skin surface. Besides texture transformation, the cardboard base successfully endures multiple interventions with acrylic paint and intensive graphite re-compositions of the original images. It is the tactile quality of the print that is essential, and the choice of paper of course, for paper can never be merely a substrate to the printed image, it complements and gives decisive form to the print. The drawing interventions were not made with intention to make the aging process visible, but as a part of a process of imagining possible identities and blurring the line between tangible and fictional women, between lived and desired feminine realities (see Pictures 3, 4 and 6), which would be impossible in another medium form; for instance photography or video format.

Presenting the portraits as vague, transforming surfaces was highly important to emphasize the fluid and relational character of identity, which was constructed and developed in relation to others. Faces appear protruding through layers of acrylic and pencil, as identities are articulated through relationships of belonging, recognition, resistance or oppression to expectations.

Looking at the installation in the gallery space, it is very hard not to notice how the facial features of women relate and resemble one another. It imposes so strongly that it is at times difficult to determine if the faces belong to the same person in different life stages or actually represent the portraits of different women, and the installation intentionally explores these ambiguities. As much as the faces may



Figure 3



Figure 4

Figure 3. Relations of Reciprocity, installation, (2019) by Ana Vivoda, digital print, acrylic, graphite, dimensions variable.

Figure 4. Relations of Reciprocity, detail, (2020) by Ana Vivoda, digital print, acrylic, graphite, 1000 x 700 mm.

seem similar, the women are quite dissimilar persons – just as the faces are made out of given, inherited physical features, subsequently marked by specific individual histories and life struggles.

SOUND AND VISION

The graphic installation expands the definition of a portrait, relating it to selected audio material. The audio discusses different female experiences, reviewing personal positions as unstable categories stretched between interiorized stereotypes and oppression to dominant social (or family) values and expectations. Several multigenerational conversations were recorded over a year-long process; conversations took place in the kitchens or dining rooms of various participants, eventually emerging into fragmented narrative and subjective reading of female family microhistory.

The recorded raw material was professionally edited[2] during an extensive process of collaboration. I was very much aware I was not able to give an impartial and comprehensive representation of the collected memories (at least of the part my collaborators felt comfortable to share), but I enjoyed tailoring my own narrative and subjective vision with a strong feeling of appreciation.

Interconnecting the audio materials and two-dimensional printed portraits was very important. In order to articulate the concept of the project clearly I wanted to balance the poesis of the images with verbal statements confronting generational and often conflicting points of view. Just as the faces in the prints are shown in a fragmentary way, the voices mix and intertwine, balancing between revealing intimate thoughts and feelings before disappearing into a collective murmur, or music based on the domestic sounds following the conversations. In the installation, speakers were discreetly located between the printed portraits and the audio was tuned to conversation volume. As the visitors moved through the gallery they could hear the sound from various sources, subtle and unobtrusive, but distinctly present in all parts of the gallery. The work tried to trigger points of recognition or familiarity with the observer, striving to find room for intimate and interrelated narratives in the public space of a gallery, emphasizing interrelations of the public and private, the impact of socio-economic frame to the individual realities, 'their aspirations and interests, their self-perception and possibilities of self-realization.' (Burcar, 2012, p. 106).

GRANDMOTHER'S TALE

Central to this installation were the experiences of my grandmother. She grew up in the midst of insecurities resulting from the Second World War, married into a large traditional patriarchal family and started a family of her own in post-war scarcity. Surprized that her grandchildren might be interested in her history, she mixed tears and excitement in her recollections. Participating in a rural family household, her life was directed by agricultural labour activities and



Figure 5



Figure 6

Figure 5. Relations of Reciprocity, detail, (2019) by Ana Vivoda, digital print, acrylic, graphite, dimensions variable.

Figure 6. Relations of Reciprocity, detail, (2020) by Ana Vivoda, digital print, acrylic, graphite, 1000 x 700 mm.

traditional gender work division (Picture 6).

My grandmother interiorized patriarchal norms and values, inflicting them on her children, but still enabled equal education opportunities and family support to all her children, both sons and daughters. Her relationship with her two daughters was marked with conflicts and resentment over their deviations from gender stereotypes, in particular, their occupation choices (my aunt graduated at the Faculty of Civil Engineering later founding a company with her husband) and their later family organization. Observing that we are great friends, my mother regrets not having had this kind of family support herself. She reflects:

'My mother was never my friend; she was always distant in every way and never agreed with me or my way of raising children. We were in constant conflict when the children were growing up. She thought that what I was doing and how I was raising my children was not normal and that I was going to ruin them.'

My sister's perspective brings another insight to this clash:

'I never felt gender restrictions while I was growing up, but I felt the difference when I stayed at my grandmother's. She had a whole other conception of life and it was inconceivable for her that we were spending the whole summer having fun and not doing anything, except helping her clean sometimes. It was a disgrace!'

My mother and aunt were torn between their traditional upbringing and new opportunities in the 70s. Yugoslavia had granted women equal political rights[3], but still constrained them on a daily basis with patriarchal structures. Intensely burdened with domestic and family obligations, my mother and aunt struggled to balance work and everyday responsibilities. They both clearly state the domestic duties were far from evenly distributed, not to mention the emotional and mental load of sustaining a household and a family. They understood the generational divide, but said they never had time for themselves when their children were growing up:

'When you have a family it all goes at your expense, but you don't think of it that way at the time. You live for your children and that's your fulfilment, you don't feel frustrated because of it.'

Hearing my mother and aunt talk, and as a mother myself, I can recognize their frustration at balancing a marriage, a child and a career. It can seem like a utopian idea, even with a supportive partner. I confess that I almost took feminism for granted, as I studied in predominantly female and openly feminist circles (at first in Rijeka, Croatia and afterwards in Stockholm, Sweden), coming to assume that we live in a postfeminist world. Only after entering the labour market and becoming a parent did I realize how patriarchal patterns of behaviour are still predominant norms. It is especially challenging to raise a daughter in light of the re-traditionalization process in Croatia that is questioning established liberties and imposing nationalist and conservative discourse.

FORMAL AND INFORMAL DISPLAY

Even though the work deals with personal experiences of a mother, grandmother and a daughter, I intend it to go beyond the individual and reflect upon the relational character of identity. The installation was initially staged at several unconventional spaces, including a meadow full of high wild grass (see Picture 5); and at a private stable that has been out of use for quite a long time, which allowed visitors to contemplate cultural stereotypes in a rather uncultivated ambience (Picture 2). The work was displayed formally at the Vasko Lipovac University Gallery in Split in September 2020, where it opened dialogue and encouraged discussions with the audience (Picture 1).

The various settings were nice opportunities to view and discuss the work, but what strongly resonated with me was a sense of a liberating experience for particular female visitors who saw the work in the gallery. They connected because the work deals with frustrations, insecurities, struggles with patriarchal norms and values through sometimes even trivial aspects of everyday life. Visitors expressed empowerment, they related to fragments of quite ordinary lives and unexceptional experiences, and associated with some of the described situations or emotions. It was a very rewarding experience for me perceiving additional weavings and upgrading of personal family narratives that enable space for recognizing further relations and readings.

REFLECTION

I wanted to use my personal story as an artistic starting point. However, a personal story is just a point of departure; I have no pretensions to make generalized statements or draw universal conclusions, but attempted to research female narratives and microhistories, some of which have been customarily excluded from general discussions or wider elaborations. The work does not relate to specific feminist discourse with a clearly defined political agenda, but considers relationality and interconnectivity of various feminist ideas and accomplishments from personal standpoints. Women accentuated in this work are not activists, their lives were/are lived quietly, far from the public arena. I intentionally presented fragments of the domestic sphere, pieces of everyday life that are often ignored or considered irrelevant. I was not searching for an 'objective' category of femininity, nor do I believe it exists, rather I was considering subjective notions and practices that define different ideas of womanhood – seized through private struggles, adjustments or resistances – that shaped specific women's lives and consequently influenced the lives of their children, who were mostly daughters.

As the work analyzes spaces of intimate battles and 'domestic activisms', it strives to give voice to individual and rather unexceptional female histories, and at the same time experiments with the

material execution of the work. The creative process balances print, painting and drawing, eventually supplementing the portraits with an audio element, introducing the voices of the portrayed women (see Picture 1). The element of print is especially important in this work for it metaphorically relates to the concept of portrait images as maps of assembled individual histories, imprinted with previous generations' genetic and emotional burdens, layered with their own life expectancies.

The installation demonstrates Kathryn Reeves' definition: 'Print exists as a trace, identity, evidence, and reproduction simultaneously.' (Reeves in Pelzer-Montada: 2018:73) The choice of the printed medium additionally accentuates multidimensional connotations of the work; I approached the face as a dynamic matrix composed of inherited marks altered by individual life styles and lived experiences. There is a similarity to working in the print medium, which is understood as a process of documenting marks, inscriptions or cuts created on a graphic plate.

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[1] My portraits are my husband's contribution to the project – artist and educator Josip Butković

[2] A professional associate Saša Predovan was appointed for sound editing.

[3] Equal rights included full health and pension insurance, paid

maternal leave with accompanying child benefits, accessible public reproductive health and public education. (Burcar: 2012, p. 107)

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IMAGE GALLERY



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