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Editor: ktpress@ktpress.co.uk
International Editorial Board: Hilary Robinson, Renee Baert,
Janis Jefferies, Joanna Frueh, Hagiwara Hiroko, Olabisi Silva.
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An Elliptical Traverse of Twentieth Century Art in, of and from the feminine'

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A report on Slovenia's *City of Women* festival in 1995/6

Pauline Barrie

In Europe during the eighties many women's art groups formed and presented international events including symposiums, exhibitions, books and magazines. All the groups used these events to develop networks throughout Holland, Germany, Italy, Austria, Ireland and Spain. Many of the events succeeded in raising money through the development of a new European initiative, the European Capitals of Culture. This meant that new monies were available for cultural events within the declared capital and it made it more possible for women artists to access some of these monies in order to present their work.

Some of these groups from the eighties still survive today (see *n.paradoxa's* list of women's art organisations) and continue to co-operate for the benefit of women artists. Others have not fared so well. A common problem has been the uncertainty of any long-term funding, especially core revenue funding and many groups have simply folded under the sheer exhaustive attempts needed to retain women's art groups and their individual programmes on short-term project funding.

Although some infrastructures from the eighties have disappeared, others have developed. New models have been formed and new histories are developing. A very recent example is The City of Women in Slovenia.

The City of Women held its first festival of women's creativity in autumn 1995. It was a multi-media event embracing many International artists in an extensive programme combining film, video, theatre, performance, exhibitions, Literature, music and a Symposium. This extensive programme had moral and financial support from the Office for Women's Policy .

The City of Women was a welcoming and well-organised International event presenting new ideas of organising and working collectively to produce a rich, varied and diverse programme of creativity. This is not just a description of the programme itself but also fits the way in which the Slovenian women worked together and networked with international participants and artists. It successfully combined women's art from the east and the west and situated Slovenian women's art into a larger cultural framework.

The Office for Women's Policy was founded in July 1992 through a decree passed by the government of the Republic of Slovenia. This was a major victory for women working together from all different political persuasions to establish a government office which could strive to achieve sexual equality in all aspects of society. The Office for Women's Policy would implement equal opportunities at the highest levels of authority yet still retain an independent status within the government as a whole. But the focus of this independent office is to work towards equal opportunities for women and men both in legislation and in everyday life. Having such an office has a dramatic effect on many things and the City of Women, as a celebration of women's creativity, had a general feeling of financial stability and solidarity.

The Office for Women's Policy also acted as a focal meeting point during the week and distributed information and changes in the programme. The Artistic Director and Head of the Project, Ursula Cetinski worked closely with a number of other women and men as well as with the Director of the Office for Women's Policy, Vera Kozmik. The office's role as a central government force with a clear agenda for women was important. Slovenia is a small country which only declared its independence from Yugoslavia in 1991, causing over nine thousand people to emigrate. Yet it embarked on a path of profound political and economic transformation. The founding of an office for women's policy is very much part of this progressive situation as well as its willingness to support cultural events and projects like The City of Women.

The City of Women was organised by a group of men and women under the auspices of an Artistic Director and Head of the Project, Ursula Cetinski. Ursula Cetinski presented a programme which concentrated on women's authorship. It represented a festival entirely devoted to art by women within Slovenia but also focused on the social reality in which women's art is produced. The City of Women was able to co-finance and co-produce much of the overall programme enabling many artists to realise their own projects. Although by the nature of a festival which only lasts a week, financial support is only short term but it does act as a catalyst and focus supporting women's creativity and providing opportunities including an international audience.

The programme included artists like Bobby Baker, Meredith Monk, the Al Dente and a rich mixture of artists from Uruguay, Spain, France, UK, USA and Slovenia. A spectacular performance/installation was given by Ema Kugler. This Slovenian artist

took her audience to a huge Ford company warehouse on the outskirts of Ljubljana. In a space large enough to build an aircraft, the spectators were subjected to a ritualistic presentation involving the burning of wax effigies, a corridor of white wax dogs, a goddess, a strange beckoning figure pulling the audience down into the blackness of this huge space. A figure whose movement resembled that of a violin crab, beckoning but threatening as well. The corridor of dogs came alive with barking which became louder as the spectators were drawn in. A smell of burning wax filled the cold night air. This was a spectacle. A performance which presented strange futuristic figures, then two men their bodies, beautiful, stylised as they fought and ran in front of a video screen. In the darkness came long pillars of light which illuminated a series of nude women, posing white Greek pillars. The colour of their nakedness seemed surreal against the blackness of this space. Holding large terracotta urns which were held as if they were pouring fluids from them they slowly turned and went back into the darkness. Very quickly they were replaced by a large white wax Goddess and an industrial gas burner which was lowered from the ceiling. It began to burn the top of the head of the Goddess. The whole of the Ford factory building was now filled with the heavy smell of burning wax, the corridors of dogs now had spikes coming through their mouths as their own wax heads melted into metal dishes. This was a spectacle of performance work I had not seen before, biblical, ritualistic and a visual feast. The artist, Ema Kugler had worked with a large group of other artists to realise her project. Funded centrally by the City of Women and sponsored by the company Ford, it provided her with an opportunity to produce something on a grand scale. Her piece was the highlight of the week.

There was also some other stunning work presented by Bobby Baker whose *Kitchen Drama* performances took its Slovenian audience by storm. Her supportive workshops encouraged its participants to shop so that they could get collectively involved in her piece. The humour and *Englishness* of Baker's performance was finely balanced by the spiritual presentation from Meredith Monk. Except for her short verbal introduction, Monk launched straight into a non-verbal performance which took her voice and sound into a timeless zone which spellbound her audience with an assemblage of sound, fusing imaginary storylines with emotional tones. Her stories of women and the girl child captivated and beguiled an audience who gave her a standing ovation. Monk's performance was simply brilliant.

Innovative music, a performance of Alma (based on material left behind by a Slovenian writer, Alma Karlin) and a heart rendering piece by Darci Picoult who gave a revealing but moving account of the wonders of science and technology in relation to women who were injured when prescribed the drug, DES, in order to prevent miscarriages.

The festival enabled new writings to emerge, women's writings were published for the first time and *Veiled Landscape* revealed a rich and diverse collection of literature. *Stereo Tip*, an International exhibition was presented at the Mestna

Galerija in the centre of Ljubljana. Curated by Helena Pivec, Eva Maria Stadler and Lilijana Stepancic, it included both male and female artists. The intention was to show how attitudes have shifted towards the present time when feminism did not exclude men but supported work which embraced the same principles. This exhibition showed a selection of works by 21 artists including GRAM (the artists club from Graz, Australia) and that the works of art themselves looked at various stereotypes which were connected with "the subjectivity of the woman".

The exhibition tried to examine the stereotypes which surround the modern woman, the way she looks, her roles, her discourse and how these shift culturally. It attempted to present an exhibition of works in which the female stereotype can be seen. This exhibition has a bilingual catalogue which outlines the intentions of the curators and gives essays by the artists.

This was a festival which provided a rich programme of events, the spectacular mixing with quieter presentations, supported by the symposium and a wide range of evening music, films and videos.

The success of The City of Women is evident in that it has just finished its second festival. Again headed by the tireless and innovative Artistic Director, Ursula Cetinski it has provided a second International Event. The 1995 programme was dedicated to female creators from Western Europe and the United States, but 1996 presented a different situation. Their latest programme had a title *Two Images of One Panorama*. Concentrating on storytelling from traditional Bosnian songs their source comes from the ancient worlds of the Sami culture. Macedonian folk singers, Greek vocalists combined with theatre from Spain. Jenny Holzer and Julia Scher presented work alongside the *Old for New*, a video documentary by Zemira Alajbegovic and Neven Korda. The range presented shows a commitment to innovation and diversity making the week a challenge of artistic creativity.

The City of Women is now developing into an independent group which hopefully will continue to provide an annual festival which differs year by year but embraces the richness of creativity we have seen them present in 1995 and 1996. Financial independence does not necessarily mean that the City of Women will have a secure future but over the last two years they have provided one of the most exciting and innovative programmes to be found anywhere in Europe or the States. Their endeavours have certainly been appreciated by the international participants but also by the Office of Women's Policy . So much of our future as women in the world lies within each countries political framework so lets hope that the elections in Slovenia maintain their present structures, offering the Office of Women's Policy a continued role in the running of the country. With the strength offered by a government office, organisations like The City of Women will find financial support easier to gain, but more importantly will be able to strengthen the role which women play in the cultural industries both in Slovenia as well as on a more global scale.

As an independent spectator at the festival it was extremely well organised and the City of Women offered a supportive and professional model of what could be achieved. There generosity and care for detailed programming made the City of Women a pleasure to attend. This success over the last two years should enable 1997 to be an even bigger and more spectacular event.

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