

Misplaced Women?

The Project

Misplaced Women? is an ongoing interdisciplinary art project (2009-2017) by Tanja Ostojić that has been conceived as both an internet–platform and a real platform organized in public spaces in the cities across the globe to discuss the issues of migration, displacement, security, privacy, and exposure. It is manifested in a series of performances by the author herself, as well as delegated performances, individual or group performances predominantly by women, and performance workshops conducted by Tanja Ostojić herself. Essentially, the performance score might include unpacking, rummaging and detailed searching of the entire content, pockets, purses, wallets, personal suitcases and bags on sites that are relevant to migration, such as airports, train stations, Western Union Money Transfer services, police stations for foreigners who want to obtain residence permits, etc. Participants performing at authentic locations might repeat similar actions that build upon the basic proposal of the *Misplaced Women?* concept, i.e. they deal with positions and experiences of people in transit, migration, and exile.

With this project, we embody and enact some of the everyday life activities that signify a displacement as common to transients, migrants, war and disaster refugees, as it is to the itinerant artists traveling the world to earn their living. These performances continue the themes of migration, desired mobility, and relations of power and vulnerability in regards to mobility and the female body, as in my numerous previous works of mine.

While contributing to one of these performances, participants gain an opportunity to develop sensibilities for related issues and processes, and that's the point where in my opinion important questions start to open up. The results of the workshops are as important as the processes that are being documented, archived and written about by most of the participants. Sometimes very valuable contributions occur, such as “coming out” by Marta Nitecka Barche of Polish origin, a student from the University of Aberdeen who spent three weeks in a regular prison in the USA several years earlier because her visa expired. She wrote about the humiliation and shame she experienced in regard to this administrative problem, and how she dealt with the handcuffing and ankle-cuffing.

One Day Long Intense Performance Art Workshop on Migration in Public Spaces in Belgrade, Serbia, October 29, 2015.

Participants for the workshop were selected by an open call via Remont Independent Artists Association in Belgrade, and we were thrilled with the level of interest from such a wide range of artists, activists, and people of various backgrounds. Women of diverse generations responded to the open

call with distinguished motivation to take part in this one-day long performance workshop. Among them, there were two 17-year-old school-girls, several art students, master- and doctoral students of art, a couple of feminists, activists and cultural workers, one nurse, and as well my colleague Nela Antonović, art director of Mimart Theater, an experienced performance artist herself. From early morning to late evening fifteen participants created a new community, as we conducted research, discussions, and two group public performances that showed to be introspective and communicative settings, for the participants and for the people passing by including refugees and volunteers who gather on nearby benches of the Info Park and the park in front of the Faculty of Economy, around Belgrade's Central-Bus-Station where Balkan Route Refugees take a moment to rest. I believe that one can understand artistic process, migration and exposure somehow "on ones own skin" only, so to say. In this sense, the workshop was an initiation of such a kind that gave to more experienced ones a strong flash of forgotten traumatic memories.

Whether or not they had any experience with performance art or migration, participants were invited to come open-minded to the workshop and to bring along some bags or a purse of their own. Our base was Remont, where we gathered in order to get to know each other and to talk about the project over a cup of tea in a democratic way. Participants were invited to perform *Misplaced Women?* and to share their experiences on the web blog and during public discussion. Contributions were posted in the form of images, notes, stories and videos to the project's blog.

We were discussing and researching, and trying out something practical and performative at three different migration specific places in the vicinity of the Central Bus Station, where approximately 300-500 refugees daily stop by, in order to get medical help, food, warm clothes, information and to charge their mobile phones. Some of them are offered to be transferred to free hostels to recover for up to three days, or to an asylum home in Krnjača suburb. Most of the refugees are waiting there for the next 10-Euro-bus direction Croatian border. Late afternoon we returned to Remont to warm up, have a lunch together, to sort out impressions and recorded material, to discuss, prepare and conduct the public presentation of the workshop that lasted until late evening.

How Did It Go?

First, we came to the storage part of Miksalište, Refugee Help Centre located in Mostarska 5, where we gave our donations and made contacts with several refugees and volunteers. Refugees told us about their journeys and the violence they experienced in some of the countries they went through. The common impression of the workshop participants was how well they handled their difficult situations and how optimistic they were. They also told us about plans for their future destinations. In the Help Center, there were mostly younger

male refugees from Afghanistan who walked over Bulgaria to Serbia. The reason why there were so few women and children there was, as we found out, that they are avoiding passing through Bulgaria in order to avoid the brutality of Bulgarian police and groups of organized hooligans. Families mainly go via Macedonia from where as soon as they enter Serbia they are registered and directly transported, by free busses arranged by Serbian police, on to the Croatian border. We met a lot of people who had been beaten up, robbed or imprisoned for up to 20 days in Bulgaria. Their cell phones, money, and passports were often taken away. We also met there a 15-year-old Kurdish Syrian girl who came over Bulgaria and who had to leave her parents behind in Turkey, since they didn't had money to travel along. She suffered from severe feet injuries and exhaustion. Inside the Miksalište there was a tent where refugee children can play and make drawings with volunteers and social workers. We took several photos of drawings where kids expressed their impressions from the journey. On one of the drawings, a child depicted explicit violence against his/her family members while on the road in Bulgaria and in Iran.

Inside the Info Park and the park in front of the Faculty of Economy we did two group performances that consisted of emptying all contents from our bags and pockets and turning each single item inside out. We were taking each item apart, including taking out batteries and cards from our mobile phones and photo-cameras, and the reverse, packing it all back afterwards. This showed to be an introspective and communicative setting for us, and as well for people passing by, including refugees and volunteers who gather on nearby benches.



Picture1. Tanja Ostojić: *Misplaced Women?* (October 2015) Workshop in Info-Park, Central-Bus-Station, Belgrade, Serbia, where Balkan Route Refugees used to rest. Photo: Lidija Antonović.

Charming Nazer, one of the asylum seekers joined us and showed the content of his refuge bag. It gave me a feeling of deep gratefulness to see, that the wool Robe-di-Kappa scarf in bordeaux colour, that was since my school years part of my father's closet, has now found a place in Nazer's bag of necessities. From the highly valuable and extensive participants reports due to a limited space I would like to share the following two excerpts:

During the workshop, I felt compassion, solidarity and the need for more solidarity (Bojana Radenović, Master student, in Theory of Art and Media, University of Arts, Belgrade).

My motivation to take part in this workshop was based on my history of strong friendships with war refugees from former Yugoslavia. I have been witnessing scenes of verbal and physical violence against refugees by, at the first glance ordinary people, and police. Participation in the *Misplaced Women?* performance workshop overwhelmed me with feelings of revolt and sadness. The change of perspective, produced by the artist's intelligent manoeuvre evoked memories of the scenes I witnessed on Bar-Belgrade train a number of years ago. Policeman was checking in a brutal way a woman traveling with two of her kids, while baby stuff were flying all over the corridor. Being involved in the *Misplaced Women?* performance myself, at once, from an observer I transformed into the victim myself. I felt naked, attacked and exposed to any passer-by who might got an idea to approach me. I thought at once about all possible complications in case my documents, bank cards or mobile phone would go missing. All those paper and plastic stuff that approve our communication and consumption, and without which, it seems, I would not be homo sapiens but rather alien. A word that could the best describes experience I had in regard to the luggage searching that I witnessed and the one I performed myself would be rape. I think this performance workshop should be an obligatory educational tool for the ones in the position of power. At the end, I stayed with more questions than answers, as our artists claim, – it is the role of art (Jelena Dinić, unemployed medical worker from Belgrade).

Misplaced Women?

*Performed by Tanja Ostojić. Dedicated to the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women in Canada. Sunday, October 16, in front of the Art Gallery of Ontario, 7a*11d 2016, Toronto, Canada. Text written by: Michelle Lacombe*

When I arrive at Dundas and McCaul Street, a public has already gathered, creating semi-circle around a woman who is holding a sign on which

MISPLACED WOMEN? is hand-written. She is casual and seems to be waiting for something to happen (Picture 2). The public waits with her. Meanwhile, I scan the area looking for Tanja Ostojić. I have met her and so I know that she is not the woman holding the sign. I find her sitting at a nearby bus stop. She looks straight ahead, also waiting. She shares her shelter with a shopping cart filled with carefully stacked reusable shopping bags, a medium-sized suitcase and a half-empty bottle of coke. She blends into the site seamlessly and so I try not to call attention to her presence. I take my place in the crowd.



Picture 2. Tanja Ostojić: *Misplaced Women?* Performance Dedicated to the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women in Canada, 7a*11d, Toronto, Canada, 2016. Photo: Henry Chan.

Eventually, Ostojić exits the glass cubicle, rolling a suitcase behind her, and positions herself between us and *Misplaced Women?* She removes her shawl and, rather brusquely, begins to empty her pockets, then her bag, then the bags contained in her bag until all of the contents, reduced to their smallest parts, litter the ground. She then shifts her attention to the suitcase. Clothes, after being inverted and having pockets and seams searched, are thrown onto her back. Anything else is pulled apart and added to the pile on the ground. She is looking for something, thoroughly searching in even the tiniest spaces. The last item she removes is a large black garbage bag and her motions slow down. She explores this object more curiously than the rest, eventually stepping into it, crouching and pulling it over her body. It fits. She then steps into the suitcase. Her body, in the garbage bag, again fits. She pulls the suitcase flap closed. She squirms, reaches out an arm and struggles to close the zipper. An audience member steps in to help. Seemingly concerned, an elderly man hovers around while Ostojić is stuffed in her suitcase, which is now clearly a tomb. I notice her body relax.

To me, this part of the action, a pause of sorts, is the most evocative, striking and difficult moment in the work. As black plastic gently rustles over Ostojić's contorted limbs, I think about the people whose bodies are found like this, in suitcases and in garbage bags: Guang Hua liu, Melonie Biddersingh, Lin Jun, Tina Fontaine, and countless others who I am sure exist, but who I either can't recall or do not know about. Most of these bodies are women, most of these women are Indigenous or racially marginalized. Sadly, what we are being presented with is a horror that is easy to imagine. It is familiar and right in front of us.

Eventually Ostojić emerges, lights a cigarette and smokes it. In solidarity, she has just embodied something and sits upright in the open suitcase to visibly reflect on it. She then slowly returns order to the pile of scattered items. As Ostojić repacks her things, a woman who has clearly just finished her shopping, arms full and ear buds in, walks over and hands her a fresh plastic bag. This simple public intervention sticks with me and I feel like an asshole when I realize how we must appear to those who do not register this as a performance. Quick to help her get into her tomb, we are now collectively distant as Ostojić works to recover and move on, back to her glass shelter. This woman, however, tried to help (Source: <http://7a-11d.ca/tanja-ostojic/>).

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Notes

Please visit the *Misplaced Women?* project blog (<https://misplacedwomen.wordpress.com>) and read the following articles:

Videkanić, Bojana: Bojana Videkanić holding the "Misplaced Women?" sign on the Toronto Airport and diving into her profoundly touching memories about her initiation into the life of a refugee escaping Sarajevo siege in 1992, publ. *Misplaced Women?* blog in 2017, sections: Airports, Borders, Signs, Stories, Toronto: <https://misplacedwomen.wordpress.com/2017/02/16/bojana-videkanic-holding-the-misplaced-women-sign-on-the-toronto-airport-and-diving-into-her-profoundly-touching-memories-about-her-initiation-into-the-life-of-a-refugee-escaping-sa/>

Marchevska, Elena: Hospitality in times of displacement: Elena Marchevska holding the "Misplaced Women?" Sign at Heathrow Airport London, December 12, 2016. publ. *Misplaced Women?* blog in 2017, sections: Airports, London, Signs, Stories: <https://misplacedwomen.wordpress.com/2017/02/11/elena-manchevska-holding-the-misplaced-women-sign-at-heathrow-airport-london-december-12-2016/>

Albor, Teresa: Teresa Albor's performances, The Yard Theatre, Hackney Wick and Westfield Shopping Mall, Stratford London, December 13 and 14, 2016. In the frame of Tanja Ostojić's *Misplaced Women?* in LADA, publ. *Misplaced Women?* blog in 2017, sections: London, Performances, Shopping Center, Stories, Workshops: <https://misplacedwomen.wordpress.com/2017/02/12/teresa-albors-performances-the-yard-theatre-hackney-wick-and-westfield-shopping-mall-stratford-london-december-13-and-14-2016-in-the-frame-of-tanja-ostojics-misplaced-women-in-l/>