

The Metropolitan Complex

Roundtable Discussion

PART TWO: Slovenia

Ireland

PARTICIPANTS: Natasa

Petresin, Alenka

Gregoric, Ajdin Basic

and Sarah Pierce.

On Monday 8 March 2004, the following conversation took place in Eburna Gallery, Ljubljana. Sarah Pierce invited the participants to have an informal discussion about Ireland as the second of two conversations involving artists and curators in Ireland and Slovenia. Each conversation asks participants about the other country, specifically its art scene, taking into account how an image of a place forms through a combination of international and local points of reference. There was no audience present.

Sarah Pierce This is my first time to Slovenia. A month ago, I held a conversation with artists in Dublin who had visited Slovenia, to ask them about the art scene here. Today, I am wondering what you might know about Ireland and the art scene there, whether through direct contact, or through rumour, the art press, etc. Natasa, you have visited Ireland?

Natasa Petresin Yes, in 2000. I had a friend there who was working in Northern Ireland as an architect and I had some personal reasons why I had to go there, which are connected to a famous Irish rock band. That is a long story. At that time Manifesta was in Ljubljana.

Sarah Pierce Did you know some of the Irish artists in Manifesta?

Natasa Petresin I knew Susan Philipsz was taking part, but I didn't meet her here, I met her in Belfast through Phil Collins— who I also have unfortunately never met, we have been in contact only via emails. Phil was my connection to Belfast. I met Susan and Eoghan Mc Tighe. We had a good conversation about Manifesta when we met in Belfast. I also met Aisling O'Beirn and Alan Hughes, who run Flax Art. Most of the artists I have met from Ireland are from Northern Ireland. They all know each other there. I remember, one evening in a pub we were drinking the famous Guinness beer, and I had been shopping and I left my bag behind along with some slides of Eoghan's. It was just a day before I left Ireland and I went to the plane without them. When I got home Eoghan wrote me an email saying the pub owner found the bag and was able to figure out the slides belonged to Eoghan and then Eoghan realised the

bag belonged to me. So eventually I got it all back.

Sarah Pierce Did you ever go to the south?

Natasa Petresin Yes, I went to a place where a music festival happens, in Skibbereen, where there is also a land art piece by James Turrell. The guy who owned the land would have festivals with Nick Cave or Lou Reed, and people would read poems and be in nature. I wanted to go there, being a Nick Cave fan and also a fan of James Turrell.

Sarah Pierce I had no idea that place existed!

Natasa Petresin There you see!

Sarah Pierce Alenka, have you been to Ireland?

Alenka Gregoric No, never.

Sarah Pierce So what do you know about Ireland, indirectly?

Alenka Gregoric I was here when Manifesta was on and I gave guided tours. That was my first real contact with the artworld, and also with Irish artists. It was good experience, especially when people would see a video and ask, "Why is that art?" It was a challenge.

Sarah Pierce Which artists from Ireland are on your radar?

Alenka Gregoric Not many. Just who Natasa already mentioned.

Sarah Pierce Do people here know about this show *ev+a*, that Zdenka Badovinac is curating in Limerick?

Alenka Gregoric Only the artists involved in the show this year know about it really. People who are not involved in art don't know about it at all. They don't know that all these artists from Ljubljana are in a show in Ireland. But that is not just about Ireland. A lot of people don't know the Istanbul Bienal exists, or even Venice.

Sarah Pierce One thing that came up in the conversation I had in Dublin, where I asked people what they knew about Ljubljana, was this notion that Slovenia has more of a sense of itself as part of Europe than Ireland does.

Alenka Gregoric I must say we have a joke here about Irish people. We say, "Oh just leave him alone. He's Irish." It is this sense that Ireland is separate, that the person is in their own world. We hear English people say it. And in a way we think it is a good position. To be separate...

Natasa Petresin It's like, "He is living in a dream world, he is living in Ireland." We have these jokes

among each other and they are all stereotypes. Like for Montenegro the synonym is being lazy. We all become a little bit racist in relation to our neighbours. Dutch - Belgium, Belgium - France, Swedish - Finns.

Sarah Pierce True. Ireland's relationship to the world is somehow always filtered through England or the US, its closest psychological neighbours. Which is different to Slovenia, who has four very different countries on its borders.

Natasa Petresin I wonder if that filtering has to do with the relationship between Ireland and Northern Ireland as well.

Sarah Pierce What is your perception of that?

Natasa Petresin When I met people in Ireland and I told them I was going to Northern Ireland for a week they were quite surprised. "What are you going to do *there*?" I realised they don't go very often. I also got the perception that between Northern Ireland and Scotland there is quite an exchange, more than between Ireland and Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland seems more open culturally, in a sense. I got the perception too that people come more often from Belfast to Dublin than from Dublin to Belfast. And in Manifesta, there were only artists from Northern Ireland. Oh! I know one more name, Willie Doherty. He is also northern.

Sarah Pierce What about James Coleman?

Natasa Petresin James Coleman...I am not sure. Where would I see him?

Sarah Pierce He was in the last couple Documentas... installation work with slides and audio, some video...

Natasa Petresin Yes, yes. I saw him in one of the collections in Germany. Okay, he is a big name. I have also been following up on this space Triskel Arts Centre. I like the programme. I also like *Circa*. I had contact with the editor because I wanted to write something.

Sarah Pierce Did that happen?

Natasa Petresin No, I can't actually remember what happened.

Sarah Pierce Where did you first see *Circa*? In Holland?

Natasa Petresin No, in Ireland. Susan showed it to me.

Sarah Pierce Is there a Slovenian art magazine?

Alenka Gregoric Not really. There was a good one that does not exist anymore. There are some that try, but they are so boring. Actually, it is a problem

in Slovenia.

Natasa Petresin I just remembered- I did this Curatorial Training Programme that Annie Fletcher did- and the director Saskia Bos just wrote us an email that she is doing a project with *Printed Project* magazine in Dublin. Do you know about it?

Alenka Gregoric Ah, yes. I was reading that. Someone sent it to me from New York because of this archive by Bik van der Pol that is collecting all the magazines that have to do with contemporary art.

Sarah Pierce Okay! It's is a small world. Bik van der Pol are in another archive I did in Dublin and they were telling me about this one. What is funny is that I edited the issue that you saw, it was the first one. Saskia is doing the second.

Natasa Petresin Cheers! That is the art world! I am writing for its next issue. Saskia asked us to send letters telling her what it is like where we live, and to focus on the events happening during the week when we write the letter. I am writing about the problems that have been raised regarding to the possible building of a mosque here and about the triennial that you saw at Moderna galerija.

Sarah Pierce Where did you study before De Appel?

Natasa Petresin Here there is a concept that a curator should have a degree in Art History. So that is what I have. In some schools here the history ends at Picasso. I was recently speaking to Maria Hlavajova who is a curator and cultural theorist, about what curators need today. What is it like in Ireland?

Sarah Pierce I don't know about the Art History degrees. Annie would know. There is just one curating course in Ireland, which began in January. In Ireland curators are a mixed bag- from highly qualified, but perhaps not in touch, to glorified administrators, to people who really know what is going on and how to connect what is happening in Ireland to other places.

Natasa Petresin What is the name of the curating programme?

Sarah Pierce It's called MAVIS- the MA in Visual Practice. It follows a model where artists, writers and curators study together in the same course.

Alenka Gregoric When Annie went to De Apple and then came back, was it easier for her?

Sarah Pierce Well, she is still based in Amsterdam, but she has come back and curated some major projects- The International Language, How things turn out, and she did a project with Apolonija. I think it has been good for her to come back and work in Ireland. Alenka, who or what spaces do you come across in your work at Skucs that relate to an Irish context?

Alenka Gregoric Transmission in Glasgow, is one. Otherwise in Ireland, there is

nothing I can think of.

Natasa Petresin I know this Temple...

Sarah Pierce Temple Bar Gallery. That is where MAVIS is based. The course uses a studio space within the institution.

Natasa Petresin I also really liked this residence in a place called Cushendall, again in Northern Ireland. It is called the Curfew Tower, and the owner is Bill Drummond, who was one of the two or three people involved in KLF, this famous visual and music group who burned one million pounds, among doing other crazy and important projects. They were MTV stars as well. He bought this tower where there is a residency for artists. It is a crazy place. People go there and do their things.

Sarah Pierce Are there other Irish reference points in Slovenia? Perhaps on a more popular level?

Natasa Petresin Well, the Dubliners are like urban legends here. They play all the time, each year, on almost the same day. And then comes U2.

Alenka Gregoric Of course. When I was in Munich at a U2 concert- Bono, who had a habit of pulling people up from the crowd, girls mostly- I remember telling my boyfriend that if he chose me out of all of the thousands of people, I would run right past him and go to Larry! But I never succeeded getting on stage.

Natasa Petresin It's interesting, here like in Ireland people believe their heroes are writers. There is also a division between contemporary art and modernism, that is not real, but perceived in the way people understand the art happening now. It is almost on a political level.

Alenka Gregoric I think in Slovenia this story of history is funny. We are never really convinced. It was communism, and we were part of it, but we are also a mixture of other places, like Italy or Austria.

Natasa Petresin Yes, we are not tuned into to just one history, like eastern history, or south-eastern as in the Balkans. I just assisted at curating a big project in Kassel that was about the Balkans and my first reaction was, Why Slovenia? It becomes funny when applying for funding. NIFCA for example considers the Balkans begin at Croatia, not Slovenia. With other places Slovenia would be inside.

Alenka Gregoric In a way, we know we are never really part of the place we are associated with, on all sides. Like the European Union, we never really feel part of the Balkans or the east, but at times you say, yes I feel more part of the Balkans, than these places in the west.

Natasa Petresin It is a love and hate relationship. We see traits from Europe-we are maybe a bit melancholic, if I go into clichés, a bit colder. But then we are warmer than Austrians, for example.

Alenka Gregoric It is always like that. Not really feeling where we belong. We

are somewhere in between everything.

Sarah Pierce Yet, I feel Slovenians have a strong national concept of themselves. Love the outdoors, for example.

Natasa Petresin Yes, but depending on where you are in Slovenia, even that relationship changes. Closer to Italy the dialect is completely different, and so is the concept of Slovenia. Same if you go towards Hungary.

Sarah Pierce Do those regional shifts also relate to class?

Natasa Petresin Not really. We are children of communism. There is not the sense of class struggle...

Sarah Pierce In Ireland there is an obsession with accents, between regions, even within Dublin different accents refer to class, or origin, northside or southside.

Natasa Petresin One thing I did notice in Dublin, among taxi drivers, who are usually the people with the news about the city- was a really racist idea about the black man migrating to Ireland to live and work there. I experienced the same thing in Holland. Drivers were racist white males and somehow these new people are a threat to the Dutch open society, which is a myth to begin with.

[AJDIN BASIC ARRIVES]

Ajdin Basic Happy Women's Day!

Sarah Pierce Yes, that's right it's International Women's Day. Everyone keeps telling us. I didn't know there was one. Where does this tradition come from?

Natasa Petresin It is socialist.

Ajdin Basic Women as the anti-fascists.

Sarah Pierce So Ajdin, what do you know about Ireland?

Ajdin Basic Nice whiskey. Good bands.

Natasa Petresin Do you remember Therapy?

Ajdin Basic Ah, yes, from high school.

Natasa Petresin Do you remember the bass player?

Ajdin Basic Uh, no. I was just watching MTV Top Ten and in Ireland West Life is in first place.

Sarah Pierce I never listen to music radio in Ireland. That is why. "Ajdin"- sounds like the Irish name "Aidan"... So, you are a designer?

Ajdin Basic Yes, a graphic designer.

Sarah Pierce I notice a lot of artists here have design backgrounds, or architecture.

Ajdin Basic A lot of designers deal with art, and artists deal with design. I think it's a world trend. One of my

friends is leaving tomorrow for Dublin. I just helped him with his project, and he phoned and said everything is fine. He is in the show *ev+a*.

Alenka Gregoric Oh, in Limerick, that Zdenka is curating.

Ajdin Basic I was saying to Alenka the other day when she told me this talk was about Irish people, that I don't know anything about Irish people. Then I was thinking about American sitcoms and there is always an Irish American. In Star Trek there is an O'Brien. It is representative to have the Irish person.

Natasa Petresin Oh, I just remembered something else! I had brand new bright orange trousers and in the south they were all telling me don't wear those in Belfast. Then I realised one day, I was in Belfast wearing them, and I also had on sneakers that said "Titanic" on the side, which I found out later sailed from the Belfast harbour.

Sarah Pierce So, I'm sure people just figured you weren't Irish. Is there an affinity between Slovenia and Ireland in a Catholic context?

Ajdin Basic People here relate to the conflict on a level that I always described in Yugoslavia, where Kosovo is like Belfast. But this could be oversimplifying. I felt that Kosovo was specifically like Belfast because of the relationship between Albanians and the Serbs.

Alenka Gregoric But in Slovenia there is not really a sense of struggle between religions. It only comes out in other ways, like the mosque being built...

Natasa Petresin This is what I wrote about for Saskia, about the controversy around the mosque being built, and the protest surrounding it.

Sarah Pierce People were against it.

Ajdin Basic This is not new though. It's a global anti-Islamic trend right now. The Slovenians are not particularly phobic.

Alenka Gregoric I always think of my mother as an example, because she is kind of a typical consumer, you know, she has a certain sense of what is going on around the world that is not really political. With the mosque she was kind of like, "I don't get it. The values are the same, so what is the problem?" She doesn't understand the problems between religion. For her it makes more sense when there are problems between race.

Ajdin Basic The problem is about being different. She sees no problem because she thinks religions are basically the same. If someone asks me why war started in Yugoslavia I always say, I don't know, because I hate the generalisations that it was about race or religion. You can just have one radical person, and give them enough power and they will start to say that the right handed people are being oppressed by left handed people and so the left handed people should be extinguished. You have a war between right handed and

left handed people. Blue eyes, black eyes, big, small, tall, whatever. Find the difference and abuse it and you can create a conflict.

Natasa Petresin People I met in Northern Ireland really had a humorous attitude towards themselves, especially young people. There was a real ironic understanding of the situation. They would say, I am protestant my girlfriend is catholic and I don't care what my parents say. I think that humour helps people survive. This has happened here too with Yugoslavia. People developed a real sense of humour.

Sarah Pierce I noticed when I went to the Museum of Modern History, there is a real history of resistance through print and graphics. There were some Slovenian fonts too. Do you know these?

Alenka Gregoric It may be part of this project, an artist who made the only real Slovenian font. It is based on the fish...

Natasa Petresin Not a fish, it is half fish, it has legs and lives in caves in the water and out of the water.

Sarah Pierce Is this a real animal?

Ajdin Basic Yes, it is only found in Slovenia. It is blind and has skin but no scales. It can breathe underwater and out of water.

Natasa Petresin It is blind because it lives in the caves. An artist made a font based on this animal.

Ajdin Basic I don't think there is necessarily a Slovenian school of typography. I have a friend who designed a font based on the Communist transcript: *The nation will write its own history*— or *destiny*— It looks incredibly good.

Sarah Pierce I also noticed that there have been a lot of changes in the flag over the years— and that is still going on right?

Ajdin Basic People want to change it because it looks a lot like the Slovakian and the Russian. Which is true. I was reading there was a state flag and a national flag and the national flag is white with blue and red and it looks the same as the new Russian flag. But the origin is totally different. The origin is from 12th century it was an old Duke dynasty design that had a heraldic symbol with the blue eagle with red claws on a silver background. A lot of people here want to change the colours not realising that their flag traces the history of Slovenia. Also, this combination of blue, red and white is specific to all the Slav nations. Except for the Poles, who redesigned the Russian flag.

Natasa Petresin And the Ukrainians.

Sarah Pierce Is there any anxiety here around language. Losing the language?

Natasa Petresin There are some phobias around that. There is also the question of where the Slovenian language emerged from— or where we emerged from, not

just the language. There are different theories.

Alenka Gregoric With the European Union there is this number, that we are "only two million." Everybody says this.

Ajdin Basic Like they will eat us alive.

Natasa Petresin I am sure there is not the same fear as in Ireland though, because here everyone speaks Slovenian.

Ajdin Basic Here there is really more the issue of dialects. There are around seven different dialects. I was just in a building where these guys were fixing something and they were speaking Slovenian but I couldn't understand a word. It was incredible.

Alenka Gregoric Also, because Ajdin just came here two years ago, I think he is fascinated with the different dialects. He is always asking, which part is that person from?

Sarah Pierce Where are you from?

Ajdin Basic I am Bosnian. I had to learn Slovenian to get my papers. I came here to study. It isn't hard for me though because it is very similar. There is this thing though between singular and plural. Slovenians have a third term for just "two." It is a special grammatical case. I heard recently that India they do this too.

Natasa Petresin Or isn't it Arabic?

Ajdin Basic I didn't hear that, but I think there is a root too in old Latin and in Greek, this idea of "two" being special.

Natasa Petresin You know more about this than we do!

Alenka Gregoric It's always the way. When you move to a country you are more open, you pick up these things.

Ajdin Basic It's the same for me, I more about Slovenian history than Bosnian.

Sarah Pierce It's also about those myths we were talking about earlier. The Dutch think they are open. The Irish think they are friendly...

Ajdin Basic In Bosnia we swear a lot. We have a whole culture of swearing about everything, mother, relatives, food, god, Bible, Koran. These are like familiar greetings. A friend came to see me and Alenka was shocked. He was saying, "Oh you mother fucking fucker I fuck your mother, blah blah blah..." And after Alenka asked, "Is he mad at you?" I said, "No we haven't seen each other in a really long time!"

Alenka Gregoric I was shocked. I thought something was wrong.

Ajdin Basic It's a local thing. A way of expressing yourself. You just accept it.

Sarah Pierce Americans are prudish about swearing. It's something I like about living in Ireland.

Ajdin Basic Like this American way of not showing any part of the human body. To see a massacre and tons of blood and people destroyed is okay. Janet Jackson's tit falls out and it's mass hysteria.

Natasa Petresin If you think of all the music videos on MTV with half naked women, the thing with Janet Jackson seems crazy.

Ajdin Basic Right, and if you are like Eminem, a big star you can be totally racist and it's cool.

Sarah Pierce Americans started this form of censorship, putting advisory warnings on everything, deciding for the consumer what is or isn't offensive. Meanwhile, its perfectly fine to go on and on about god's will...

Alenka Gregoric Oh yes, Oprah is always saying god bless you this and that.

Sarah Pierce Hey, we are running out of time. Any last words on Ireland?

Alenka Gregoric What about this monster from the lake?

Ajdin Basic That's in Scotland.

Sarah Pierce You have hit on an ongoing theme in these papers—Glasgow and Scotland are somehow always present.

Natasa Petresin There is the difference in how people say the word "Celtic Country,"

Ajdin Basic Celtic? They have great uniforms. Well designed.

Alenka Gregoric You are such a football fan maybe you could send them a message.

Ajdin Basic I am not really a big fan, but I have a joke that they could use. In Sarajevo the city is divided between two football clubs, one is called *Sarajevo* and the other is *Āeljezniāar*. Two guys in Sarajevo are sitting down talking and one says, "Did you hear that the Rolling Stones are going to play in the city stadium?" The other guy says, "Oh never mind, *Āeljezniāar* will beat them."

The Metropolitan Complex is a project by Sarah Pierce. It organises a social practice around a range of activities such as exhibitions, talks, and publications. These structures often open up to the personal and the incidental. This is Paper No. 4 in a series of discussions published by The Metropolitan Complex that circulate as free publications. PART ONE: Ireland Slovenia was printed on the occasion of the exhibition *Country*, at Equrna Gallery, Ljubljana, and was translated into Slovene for distribution in Ljubljana. Commissioned by The Art Projects Network.

Supported by the Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon.

info@themetropolitancomplex.com
www.themetropolitancomplex.com

D O W N L O A D

Originally printed as an A2
broadsheet in an edition of 500
on the occasion of the exhibition
Country, at Equrna Gallery,
Ljubljana

