

A conversation between Vlatka Horvat and Tim Etchells in relation to Horvat's "15th Extraordinary Congress: Brussels"

TE: The performance project you made recently drew on historical events surrounding the dissolution of Yugoslavia. What do you remember about the 14th Extraordinary Congress that your work refers to and why did you want to think back to it?

VH: The 14th Extraordinary Congress of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia, held in Belgrade in January 1990, was the last congress of the delegations of the Communist parties of all the Yugoslav republics. It was called 'extraordinary' because it was held outside the regular schedule, and on the agenda were questions of the country's organization, structure, and decision-making procedures. The 14th Congress is significant because the Slovenian and Croatian delegations walked out after 2 days of meetings, after all the proposals of the Slovenian party – one of which was to restructure the country as a confederation – were systematically being voted down by the Milosevic-led voting majority. I was a teenager then, but I remember vividly being glued to the TV with my family watching the proceedings unfold in real time. There was a huge sense of uncertainty and trepidation in the room, a hovering question of 'What does this mean?' and 'What's going to happen?'

TE: Did it seem like war was inevitable after that?

VH: No, I don't think so, not then. I left the country a year and a half later, in the summer of 1991, to go on a student exchange programme in the US, and at that point the wars hadn't started. I think there was still some sense – or hope perhaps – that things can be worked out somehow, though I remember this line that was being repeated often: "This isn't good". For months and months it's all anyone talked out. But somehow every time there was any kind of escalation, people still held onto this belief that peace would hold. At least people I knew! Even when, for example, the war was in full swing in Croatia, people in Bosnia were still saying, "It couldn't happen here".

TE: That claim also came up in my dialogue with Lara Pawson, who underlined that in England there's a common idea that we have some supposed intrinsic stability, the identity narrative that we're 'civilized'. The possibility of anarchy or breakdown far away is explained implicitly in the media here by the fact that other cultures supposedly lack the qualities that hold our society together. It's a racist myth basically through which, the former colonial powers look upon other countries as somehow being predisposed to chaos and violence.

VH: Well the Balkans certainly share that kind of reputation! "The region" - as it's now referred to – is often painted as the epitome of lawlessness and unruly instability in Europe. In response to what you were saying though I think one of the things my project is interested in is the strange set of shifts in perception caused by time. Looking back on that period now, certain escalations seem like they were inevitable because of the particular combination of circumstances and forces that were in operation at that time. But back in the '90s, I don't think it seemed like that – at least not to my teenage self trying to make sense of the situation... It's as if the narratives of looking back have a tendency to solidify things in some way – perhaps because there are vested interests at play in that process – while of course in other ways they also make things seem looser, more uncertain, as they are processed through different kinds of distorting lenses – lens of forgetting and misremembering, for example. They are as well always contingent on the context of 'now' and – to a degree at least – affected by the various 'official' manipulations of information and of history.

TE: So that Congress is a trembling of the structure that is Yugoslavia and it's the last time that the Communist Parties of the different republics meet. Can you talk about your 15th *Extraordinary Congress* project – about how it looks back at the end of Yugoslavia and at the war?

VH: 15th *Extraordinary Congress* was first presented during LIFT Festival in London in 2014 and this year I'm making new versions for Brussels, Berlin, and Bergen. The project assembles a group of six or seven women, all of them artists of one kind or another, all born some time in the '70s in different parts of what was then Yugoslavia and all now based in the cities or regions where the piece is being presented.

In the piece the participants spend 4 hours – working in a game-like structure of questions and time limits – reflecting on, or trying to answer the question, 'What happened there?' I like this question because of the different possible approaches and readings it opens up. It refers to specific instances of 'what happened' in terms of the break up of the country, but also 'what happened there' in other micro and macro arenas of life – in everyday life, in political life, in the media sphere, and so on. So the piece is a gathering that puts on the table a set of fragmentary answers, accounts, theories and positions, all of which sit side by side, decidedly unresolved, with all their inconsistencies and contradictions.

TE: Your 15th *Congress*, is all women, and it's an act of looking back – *after* something.

VH: Yes, women don't often tend to be the ones in charge of the "official" historiography! All the participants I invite are also artists, who, like me, at some point and for a variety of reasons, left the country – a place in which we all shared some part of our lives, and this shared experience ended in 1991.

In one sense, the piece looks back at this place - 'after EVERYTHING' – which of course is a paradoxical thing to say, as 'after' is never definitive and never finished. There are always multiple 'afters' that follow. The piece deals with a lot of 'after' – after the First World War, after the Second World War, after Yugoslavia, after socialism, after that chunk of history we all shared, after the wars in the '90s, after the political upheavals that followed – which defined, in a lot of problematic ways, the relationships between the new countries there, and which are still, continually, being worked out and re-defined. And at the same time it's after personal moments in the performers' lives – it's after we all left the place and are looking at it now not only from a temporal, but also a geographical distance. There is of course also a different kind of distance that accompanies those experiences and narratives of displacement and repositioning...

I'm thinking of yet another 'after' too – it's almost as though 15th *Extraordinary Congress* takes place after you've stopped looking at 'that place,' after it's all 'over' and you're 'done with all that'. I'm interested in that question of how do you look at a thing or at a place or at a period of time, after you've stopped looking at it, and also after it's ceased to be the focus or the drama of the various 'big eyes' looking at it from the outside.

TE: It's interesting to think about the rhythm of the international, geopolitical gaze, because there was that moment when the former Yugoslavia was high on a lot of people's radar –

VH: Yes, it was the flavour of the month for awhile there! Then attention moved elsewhere – to the Middle East, to the former Russian republics, to China...

TE: Yes. The gaze follows unrest and volatile political situations, I suppose. It follows violence. It follows war. But what's interesting of course is that after that particular media-led gaze has moved on; the people of any particular region, in this case former Yugoslavia, are still there, still dealing with their questions and their lives.

VH: Certainly - I'm very aware that anything I say is coming from a perspective of distance, perspective of 'not being there', and not having to deal with a lot of things – on the level of everyday life at least. The process of 'looking back' is always contingent on your current situation, and it's very different if you are living the consequences and the aftermaths of all these things in tangible ways –

on the ground, as it were. There's also I think a difference in one's willingness to look back when you are not there – there are different consequences to those processes; the 'looking back' affects your life differently perhaps. I'm also aware that my own removal, and my, now more-than-twenty-year-long, absence means there are also gaps in my understanding of 'what happened' and what is happening now. And I'm interested in those gaps – in what you fill them with.

TE: One of the things that struck me in your project is that it's hard to list all the wars that it's after – do you feel as though you're dealing specifically with the '90s and after or does your conversation include that bigger sweep of history?

VH: My initial thinking about the project was framed as a response to the centenary of the outbreak of WWI. It was in the aftermath of the First World War that Yugoslavia was created, at least one of its versions (Yugoslavia had a lot of versions in its relatively short existence as a country). It was of course redefined very radically in the aftermath of the Second World War, when the version of the country that I grew up in was created. And then that version was dismantled in the wars in the '90s. I became interested in the idea of looking at a country as an object; this 'thing' that was Yugoslavia, which had a lifespan of some 70 years... You can pinpoint to the moment it starts and to the moment it ends – it's a geopolitical object framed on both ends of its objecthood with wars. And – as in a lot of my work with objects, images and spaces – I'm always particularly interested in the dissolution of objects, the gestures and processes of their being taken apart, or their falling apart. And, in case of country-as-object, I wanted to ask how might you read that particular dissolution? How can you try understand it?

TE: How much is this a project in which you're making a space for yourself and other people to encounter different sides of what happened? Were there things that challenged your assumptions about what happened in the build up to the wars and their aftermath?

VH: For each version I try to find participants born in different parts of Yugoslavia, but I don't want to follow a 'one person from each republic' formula because I don't think any of us is really keen to be framed in those terms, or to 'represent' a place in that way – I certainly wouldn't want to. Plus, in Yugoslavia there were so many interweavings of social and cultural and national identities and sense of belonging that you can't really do that kind of representation without perpetrating another violence.

While the piece is certainly interested in the inconsistencies and complexities of stories you might tell about a place, I was quite conscious that the participants in London were not so far away from each other in terms of our political leanings (and I'm probably making a lot of assumptions when I say this!). But I think it stands that people further away on the spectrum might well have thrown up more radical clashes of positions and interpretations of history... Nonetheless, I was struck and surprised by the different frames of reading and understanding we each had.

As I said earlier, I think our understanding of what happened is to some degree affected by the rhetoric and discourse of the dominant powers in which each of us grew up. Even if you put yourself in opposition to those frameworks, people's narratives still bear traces of, or clearly position themselves in relation to, whatever the official historiography or version or analysis of the situation is. So you are inevitably dealing with that picture, or those versions of the story also.

And of course different people's personal experiences – what specifically happened to them, what happened to their families, what happened to friends or people around them – are very particular.

TE: What is it about this project and its desire to look back, your desire to look back – what's in that excavation in relation to Yugoslavia and the wars?

VH: In a way it's an attempt to understand the now, or to understand the possibilities of the future in some way.

I should say that for me this 'looking back' often has troubling aspects. It is often used to glorify a particular version of history, to construct the kinds of narratives that will serve those in power at any particular moment. There have been so many revisions of history in "the region" and how you understand or frame 'what happened there' is still very much up for grabs. Throughout history of this 'thing that was Yugoslavia' and throughout history of the countries that are there now, there have been several extensive rewritings, as though with every change of government, history is always being reframed, re-imagined, or re-invented. So I think the acts of looking back always beg the question, "What is the agenda of the looking back?"

But with all that looking back, there's been a huge emphasis in the discourse of the dominant power structures on the opposite discourse too – that of *going forwards*. And in that rhetoric of 'moving on' and 'going forwards' there's a real pull towards forgetting, towards erasure. So there have been endless revisions of the past through state interventions in public space and social space (enacted through the gestures of renaming, for example, of streets and institutions), through changes to which figures are supposed to be considered heroic, or changes to what ideas and principles should be regarded as 'worthy' and which 'problematic'. Everything can get rewritten and rewritten again.

TE: I'm thinking about this crude narrative that goes from the war, and the nationalism that goes with the war, to the rise of the right in so many of those countries post-war, and the dissolution of socialism and the arrival of the rather brutal version of capitalism you have there now. Through that process, a whole culture gets swept out –Yugoslavia, the culture your parents invested their lives in as working people, the culture you grew up in. I'm wondering if for you the war, which is the way that Yugoslavia dissolves, is linked inextricably to the movements that follow it – the move to the right, and then into this very brutal free market - is that a single story for you?

VH: I tend to think of socialism and Yugoslavia as one period and from the '90s on as a kind of more chopped up period! There's been a succession of governments since then, with a pendulum swing from the right to the former Communists to the right again, ending up with some form of Neoliberalism – or whatever this is that's in place now! I think the most dangerous, devastating thing happened in the '90s, with HDZ in Croatia and Milosevic in Serbia. Those ultra-nationalist governments thrived on a very restricted sense of national identity, subsuming culture for their political ends. With nationalist governments of course everything becomes a mechanism for creating sentiment and a sense of belonging, and everything that doesn't conform to that gets framed as anti-nation. There is a way of conflating the perception of the government with the broader construct of the nation – this is not unique or unusual of course. In relation to that discourse, it becomes 'problematic' to be critical of the government because doing that frames you as being against the nation. I'm talking about the '90s mainly – which were bad times! But it's worse now in many different ways. There is a version of capitalism there that's unencumbered by any morality, marked with a complete erosion of workers' rights, huge corruption, complete demise of the law and the justice system, and 'each man for himself' mentality. And all coupled with the extremely invasive and pervasive dominance and meddling of the church, in all aspects of public life. You put all those things together and it's a very bleak story.