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Rosa of Luxembourg

Sanja Ivekovic's counter-monument to the Luxembourg war memorial »Gëlle Fra«, and the debate it has caused

»Tear it down!« »An eyesore!« »Take this rubbish away!« – In the fiscal paradise of Luxembourg, one of the richest regions in the world, the statue of a pregnant woman has provoked a debate about cultural liberality similar to the one caused by the ultra-conservative Jesse Helms with his campaign against the works of Andres Serrano and Robert Mapplethorpe in the USA in the late '80s – and just as heated. The Zagreb artist Sanja Ivekovic erected a replica within sight of the Luxembourg landmark »Gëlle Fra« as her contribution to the exhibition »Luxembourg – The Luxembourgers,« organized by Enrico Lunghi in the Luxembourg casino; and this replica has caused feelings to run high. Created by Claus Citto, the »Gëlle Fra« is a neo-classicistic monument erected in 1923 as a memorial to Luxembourgian volunteers in the First World War. It was demolished by the Nazis. Right-wing voices were now heard saying that the replica made fun of this old national monument. This was indignation with an extraordinarily short memory. For the »Gëlle Fra« became a »national monument« very late on; in fact, only after it was reerected in 1985. In 1940 Luxembourgian workers hid the statue from the Nazis. This induced those reerecting the memorial, whose sole motivation was actually a desire to preserve monuments, to build the statue up to be an anti-fascist memorial.

With her replica, Ivekovic made the controversy surrounding the golden heroine, which had been driven from public awareness, her central theme: in 1923, the Catholic, conservative bourgeoisie rose up against the »naked woman right opposite the sacred shrine of the cathedral.« And, from 1981, during the debates surrounding the reerection of the monument, issues such as compulsory recruitment during the Nazi years, the treatment of volunteers in the Spanish Civil War, and the way women had been left out of official historiography were discussed for the first time. But this work on local memories and against their historical misrepresentation was only a minor factor in the public controversy about Ivekovic's »Lady Rosa of Luxembourg.« It was cited by liberal commentators to legitimate their defense of the work against the people's anger so that they – or so it seemed – could skirt the truly scandalous issue: the openly racist malice directed against the artist. The voices from the Right that admonished Ivekovic by saying that she, as a Croat, should be the first one to understand the symbolic value of a memorial to resistance were the most moderate. Luxembourgian nationalists even crassly insinuated that Ivekovic had tried once more to destroy this monument, which became a symbol of resistance in 1940, »in Germany's interest.«

Even liberal politics, which felt itself under attack from the Right, found a not unsymptomatic way out by regionalizing Ivekovic's work. One female politician, for example, was heard delivering the following public statement: »The wars in the former Yugoslavia have added another dimension to the cruelties to which women have been subjected. Rape as a system of war – the war in Yugoslavia, which could scarcely be surpassed in terms of cruelty, used it to make women a particular target.« Another line of defense, one employed, for example, by culture minister Erna Hennicot-Schoepges, tried to tone down the work's public status by interpreting it in

relation to private experiences in the artist's life: it was mentioned how Ivekovic had been a direct and indirect victim of the war, and how her mother, an active resistance fighter, had spent two years in Auschwitz. These attempts at attack and defense coming from various political flanks have one characteristic in common: the non-recognition of gender as a specific category when citizenship and national inclusions/exclusions are under discussion. The deterritorialization and privatization of motives, which plays down or even denies the local – and universal – political (and not merely cultural) significance of Ivekovic's art intervention, is a very familiar strategy. Ivekovic's work has revolved around the themes gender, identity, and memory since the '70s. With her pregnant heroine, she takes up precisely this theme of feminist struggles for recognition over the past decades as well: the neutral, abstract, and universal definition of citizenship firmly set down in postwar European constitutions, whose blind spot is its inability to recognize the political relevance of gender. The »Gëlle Fra,« a monument that is belated both stylistically and iconologically, and, in the '20s, imitated the 19th century female allegories of the nation-state – the »Germanias,« »Polonias,« and »Mariannes« – is, says Ivekovic, especially suitable for exposing this blind spot, one that still exists today in concepts of citizenship: »This monument is dedicated to the memory of men, yet it derives its effect from the beauty of a female figure standing on the top of an obelisk.«

Since the beginning of March, commemorative actions have made the site of the new »Gëlle Fra« into a place of public remembrance: flowers tied together with ribbons for »the woman who suffered because of the war« have been laid there, and the location and the debate surrounding it have become a highly charged symbolic medium. Ivekovic herself set the example by placing a ribbon with an inscription at the base of the statue. On it, she juxtaposed political and cultural terms with terms denoting patriarchal views of women: liberté, indépendance, justice; art, culture, capital; virgin, Madonna, bitch, whore.

Ivekovic refers not only to the dialectics that have arisen around these inscriptions and the subject of the statue, but also to the words inscribed on the pedestal of the old monument, such as the nationalistic texts glorifying war composed by General Foch.

The manifold points of local relevance are in themselves not enough to explain the stir caused by Ivekovic's work. The Luxembourg »art scandal« is, rather, symptomatic both of the restoring of heritage, and of culture, at a time when economically motivated talk about dissolving the sovereignty of nation-state politics is to be heard from all sides.

Published in: *Život umjetnosti* No 65-66, Zagreb