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## Sanja Iveković: Statement on the project «Lady Rosa of Luxembourg»

In all my work since the beginning of the seventies three major themes have preoccupied me the most: gender, identity and memory. As a woman I have always been interested in issues that are of special concern to women, including heterosexual relationships, maternity as well as sexual and domestic violence, sexism, ageism and reproductive rights. For me as a visual artist the starting point of my research is the visual representation of woman in our everyday life transmitted to us by mass media. As a feminist, I have tried to make art that reflects my political consciousness of what it means to be a woman in a patriarchal culture.

In 1997 I was invited to participate in "Manifesta 2", the European Biennale of Contemporary Art which was about to happen in Luxembourg. The same year I started a media project called GEN XX where I have been dealing with the problem of collective amnesia as regard to the anti-fascist movement in Croatia active before and during the Second World War. In this project my aim was to (re)present the women who were known to my generation as "National Heroines" but who were wiped out from the collective memory in my native Croatia of the nineties. When I came to Luxembourg for the first time I was immediately fascinated with Gelle Fra for many reasons. At one hand, Gelle Fra is a scholarly example of a product of a male culture and is typical of the time when it was made. It is an allegory of victory (Nike), in this case represented without wings and as such known in a European context. It is a monument dedicated to male heroes only but its symbolic power lies in a beautiful statue of a female figure on the top of the obelisk. Such an idealized woman's figure personifies the nation which is, as Benedict Anderson says, «imagined as a community: the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings». I have learned about the history of the monument and was impressed with the fact that Gelle Fra represents a powerful symbol of freedom and resistance for the people of Luxembourg. I also learned that in the resistance movement in Luxembourg (as is the case in other resistant movements in occupied Europe at the time) women played an important role. Yet, a women's contribution is not mentioned at all. On the other hand Gelle Fra "works" as an allegory and «the allegories are 'female' because only images of women-who stay outside (economic and state) competition-were appropriate to represent the imagined community's interest» (Silke Wenk). In other words «the liberty is not represented as a woman because women were or are free. In the nineteenth century, when so many of these images were made widely disseminated, the opposite was conspicuously the case; indeed the French Republic was one of the last European countries to give its female citizens the vote. Often the recognition of a difference between the symbolic order, inhabited by ideal, allegorical figures, and the actual order depends on the unlikelihood of women practicing the concepts they represent» (Marina Warner). For example, the French revolution was also pictured as a woman, made immortal by Delacroix in his painting «Liberty Guiding the People». But although many women took part in the French Revolution, after the revolution they were declared «witches» and either removed from the political scene or even killed. I would like to remind you now that Rosa Luxemburg was killed because of her radical political ideas. It is also important to remember that women who don't fit into the patriarchal order are commonly addressed as «bitches», «witches» and «whores».

The basic intention of my project "Rosa of Luxembourg" was to visualize these thoughts by challenging the stereotyped image of women and raising questions about the position of women in contemporary societies but also about our understanding of the women's role in the past.

But there's a small history of the ideas about this project. My first proposal (back in 1998) was considered too radical and I think it never came out of the gallery's office. I suggested that during the time of the international exhibition «Manifesta 2», the statue of Gelle Fra be removed from the original site and placed in the shelter for abused women in Luxembourg. I got this idea when reading a touching story on how during the Nazi occupation of your country, the bronze figure was kept in a safe place by Luxembourgish workers. At the time I had some experience in working with the issue of violence against women and thought that this gesture would help in raising public consciousness about domestic violence, a problem that exists in all contemporary societies but which is still not properly addressed. (In the same exhibition I exhibited an installation which was part of a project that I am still working on. It was made through a collaboration with the organization «Femmes en detresse» and women who were living in the shelter took an active role in shaping it – it was an unforgettable experience for me.) In other proposals (one sketch is published in the exhibition's catalogue) I offered a number of different artistic «interventions» but ultimately I had to accept the idea that if I want to deal with the symbolism of Gelle Fra I would have to build a second one. So, I was very excited when I got the invitation to participate in this exhibition for which this project is indeed a relevant one. Then, it took me some time to find an appropriate shape for a female figure that would represent a different woman but that would still resemble Gelle Fra. First, I considered «appearances» of female figures that are rarely seen in the media such as older women, or/and big women – as opposed to the images of young and slim girls that are polluting our urban visual landscape. At first I was against the idea of a pregnant woman, but finally found it to be the best solution. Although the pregnancy (my own) was a theme of some of my previous work, I always find it difficult to deal with the representation of the maternal precisely because the femininity in a western culture has been constantly confined within the limits of the maternal. Also, in many European paintings and monuments, a female allegory such as Marianne, Germania, Finland, or Polonia is considered to be the mother of the nation. On the other hand the question of motherhood bares today's most crucially important ethical issues: biological determination, gender difference, scientific ethics (just think of genetic engineering), women's rights, children's rights. While working on this project I was aware that this image might be provocative for some people who are not used to questioning the world around them. But the job of the artist is to raise questions. In his essay «Five Difficulties in Writing the Truth» Bertold Brecht lists that in order to «tell the truth one needs the courage to write it, the intelligence to recognize it, the art to use it as a weapon, the practical sense for the choice of those who would make use of it most effectively, and the cunning to spread it widely». In my project «Lady Rosa of Luxembourg» I have tried to meet the same criteria.