We need our bones. And coats.[[1]](#footnote-1)

This text is about love. It is also about Katarina Zdjelar’s two films, *Reading “Europe Where Have You Displaced Love?”* and *Gaze is a Bridge*, which make me think about rehearsal, improvisation, intimacy, and love’s political potential.

Can one rehearse love? (I ask myself.) Love cannot be rehearsed. (Comes the immediate response. And yet.) What can be easily rehearsed are cultural norms, conventions, regulatory scenarios, the execution of rules. However, what happens when what being rehearsed is not a piece or score that exists but one that is being written in the process of a rehearsal? Can such situation facilitate perspectives and enchantments that strive towards new solidarities, affinities and alliances?

Katarina Zdjelar’s working method is often described as taking place in a mode of rehearsal. In the context of performing arts, rehearsal is usually associated with a practice of an existing piece, its repetition, with an aim of arriving at its most controlled and coordinated performance. However in Zdjelar’s practice such ensemble activities are set up in order to bring together various actors who than in a collective activity. Be it the reading of a poem or descriptions of a painting, these situations bypass conventional understandings of a rehearsal.

Firstly, because there’s no script to this performance, nor instructions provided by the director. The artists’ role here is not that of a film director but of a creator of circumstances where people can meet and see each other.

Second, there are no hierarchies, the chain of command is dissolved. The camera person’s role becomes no different to those whom the camera’s lens pans, or to the one who is preparing coffee in the backstage of the kitchen. Children are not kept outside of the camera’s frame but often steer the course of events. Here everyone becomes a protagonist.

In such situation what happens is that the roles shift, the distinction between the represented and the subject, actors and directors seem to become obsolete. They merge into an entity that Zdjelar often describes as a “new subject in the making”.

The aim here is not an arrival at a harmonious performance, or consensually agreed upon end result, but rather an opening up to the yet-to-be-experienced, perhaps a yet-to-be-desired.

The filming of *Reading “Europe Where Have You Displaced Love?”* took place in the artist’s living room, I recall the focused yet serene atmosphere when I arrived at the place.[[2]](#footnote-2) One of the participants sitting on the floor, reading and whispering to themselves the lines of a poem by Athena Farrokhzad, “Europe Where Have You Displaced Love?”, which the title of the piece references. In another corner of the room, a duo of musicians discusses the musical rendition of the piece. “This sounds too oriental”, one of them remarks. “Well, it has to sound somehow?” comes a response, but they continue playing. One after another the musicians take and lose control, the “oriental” guitar fades out and gives space to the violin, just to arrive at a silent moment. Lines from the poem surface amongst the instruments, first as whispers, than as voices: “Mina and Bahar have left, I don’t think they’ll come back” and “It occurs to me that I will never become Europe. I am talking to myself again.” At any moment during the rehearsal when the musicians would arrive at a common melody, doubts occur and a voice or another instrument steer the process in a different direction.

Farrokhzad’s poem[[3]](#footnote-3) interrogates the illusion that “fort Europe” has built of itself, and the crisis of this failing empire resulting in xenophobic and nationalistic policies. Love has been evicted in the contemporary Europe Farrokhzad describes. I recall Lauren Berlant’s conception of love as an “opening for other’s inconvenience”[[4]](#footnote-4), and indeed there’s no such love to be found in the poem’s lines, but a recounting of the cruel border regime, the conditions that enforce sameness and social control.

In Zdjelar’s video work “the song”, as an interpretation of the poem, never materializes. Instead of the making of a song, the piece becomes a process of continuous search where a multiplicity of interacting voices coexist. It is not a dialectical method, with a back and forth, action and reaction game between the musicians, but instead, it is an opening to a field of possibilities. At times this process is not without struggles, minor dissonance or discomfort occurs. As I listen, the squeaky sound of the hand being dragged on the back of the cello sends shivers down my spine.

What this kind of being together, or a “making of a song” entails is letting go of the usual aims and common ways of working, which requires openness and foremost an opening up to each other. This way, it acknowledges and remains grounded in the reality Farrokhzad’s Europe describes, but it also becomes propositional in its method. Without lapsing into an idealization of togetherness, or that of collaborative working methods for their own sake, *Reading Europe* is an appeal to surrender to the other’s inconvenience.

The “ new subject in the making” that Katarina Zdjelar speaks of is perhaps one that is open to the possibility of moving beyond itself, one that is not afraid to be touched and formed by another. I’d like to think, this is a mode of affective solidarity[[5]](#footnote-5), or in another way of saying, love.

*Gaze is a Bridge* starts by a superimposed close-up of two women. Their faces do not overlap, but the image shows them as if looking at the same direction. From their gestures and movement of their gaze we sense that they are looking at each other. The facial expressions also reveal a playful intimacy between the two protagonists as they engage in an improvisational game of words in a call and response manner. The game is being invented as they proceed: it becomes a play of push and pull, letting close and pulling away. By improvising they continuously establish difference, to distinguish themselves from the other, but this difference also maintains a kind of gravitational traction between the two that keeps the game going.

The scenery can be considered another rehearsal where a play is being written in the moment of an encounter. Such circumstances inevitably create an exercise in continuous improvisation for all involved. In a strict sense every rehearsal requires repetition, after all no action or sequence of actions may be performed the exact same way twice. Rehearsals necessarily create an improvisatory space. Improvisation can be also considered the condition which allows for the deviation from standard procedures, thought patterns or processes. And similarly, improvisation can be thought of as a space of invention or reinvention of oneself, as an individual as well as a collective.

Only later in the film we see clearly the prompt to this game, an image of a painting by Nasta Rojc, titled *Self-Portrait in a Hunting Suit*. Rojc was a painter whose contribution to art history is only slowly being written into the artistic canon, and her unconventional life has challenged many of the norms of her time. Her gaze on the self-portrait is penetrating, provocative, but it also demands to be looked back, to be seen. When one looks at the painting long enough, the keen gaze makes the background landscape become increasingly blurry, even the artis-hunter’s gun seem to disappear. It is only the gaze that remains.

During the improvisatory exercise the two protagonists, Ana Opalic and Martina Zvonic, not only co-create the game, but also invent and create each other’s reality. Departing from Rojc’ painting with its gray horizon, they describe and construct their own scenery, where even birds might appear. Through this imaginary world-building process the two women enter into a transhistorical relationality with the painter Nasta Rojc, into a kind of solidarity that transcends time and space. While their build their own world and connection through the game, the painter’s gaze, looking back at them, becomes part of their narrative too.

When one’s life path does not follow common societal norms and scripts, improvisation becomes necessary. Be it challenging the historically subjugated role of women in a patriarchal society, the position of female artists, the image of the heteronormative couple, or societally acceptable forms of love, such improvisatory mode requires resilience and a capacity to withstand the fragility of this world envisioned together.

Love is a destabilizing force, it disorganizes one’s life and it opens one up to move beyond oneself.[[6]](#footnote-6) At the same time, love activates yet unimaginable capacities, and allows for the reaching beyond the known world of possibilities and alliances.

In one of the most poignant moments of the duo’s exchange one of the women poses the question “What is in the heart?… fear”, to which the other’s objection prompts a reconsideration “No. There’s freedom.” Love here, is to be found in that freedom. Not in the freedom of the individual self, but rather in the struggle for another’s freedom, across time and space.

1. The title is a reference to the words of Ana Opalic and Martina Zvonic in Katarina Zdjelar’s film *Gaze is a Bridge*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Reading “Europe Where Have You Displaced Love?”* was commissioned for the exhibition *Post-Opera* (TENT Rotterdam, 2019) that I’ve co-curated with musicologist and opera scholar Jelena Novak. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Written on the invitation of the Letter to Europe project, Farrokhzad’s poem draws thematically upon Allen Ginsberg’s 1956 work “America”. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Lauren Berlant, “The Book of Love is long and boring, no one can lift the damn thing”, 14 May 2014. Befrois. <https://www.berfrois.com/2014/05/lauren-berlants-love-theory/> In the referenced article Lauren Berlant declared themselves a “love theorist”. In this essay I often draw on Berlant’s considerations on love and I remain indebted to their writing on the subject. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Lauren Berlant, “A properly political concept of love: Three Approaches in Ten Pages”, Cultural Anthropology 26(4):683 – 691, p. 686. DOI:10.1111/j.1548-1360.2011.01120.x [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Lauren Berlant in “On the Risk of a New Relationality: An Interview with Lauren Berlant and Michael Hardt” by Heather Davis and Paige Sarlin, Reviews in Cultural Theory, 2.3. <http://reviewsinculture.com/2012/10/15/on-the-risk-of-a-new-relationality-an-interview-with-lauren-berlant-and-michael-hardt/> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)