

The article is a case study of the contemporary performance art piece *Kapelj and Semenič under construction* (Kapelj in Semenič v sestavljanju) (2012, Ljubljana). The aim is to extract not only the performance's particular politicality through its site-specific aesthetic format and the audience interaction with it but also the correspondence of the form to the content and the concurrent political situation. Situated inside Simona Semenič's house, the performance was a textual (Semenič) and scenographic (Kapelj) site-specific installation. Spectators were immersed into the installation and then left free to wander in the format of immersive theatre, following the logic of the "construction's" station dramaturgy. The politicality of the piece problematises the somewhat archaic roles of a play/drama and of scenography on the backdrop of postdramatic theatre. By that, it also emphasises the specific role of drama, its formal development and politicality in the Slovenian historical political context from post-socialism to capitalism. The paper will demonstrate, however, that the politicality of the piece does not derive solely from the formal and historical dramatic references or the content of the dramatic text discussing the socio-political context of 2012. Rather, it is the particular aesthetic format of its site-specific placement that raises discussions around identity politics, that is, the precarious and socially-marginalised entity of the non-institutional cultural worker, female, single mother, playwright, etc.

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**Keywords:** Simona Semenič, Barbara Kapelj Osredkar, site-specific performance, immersive performance, (Slovenian) performing arts, non-governmental organisations, politicality

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**Nika Leskovšek** is an assistant-researcher and PhD Candidate at the Academy of Theatre, Radio, Film and Television of the University of Ljubljana. She is active as a theorist, theatre critic and dramaturg in the Slovenian performing arts scene.

nika.leskovsek@gmail.com

# The Politicality of Participatory Theatre in *Kapelj and Semenič under construction*

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Nika Leskovšek<sup>1</sup>

AGRFT, University of Ljubljana

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In this article, I will discuss the work *Kapelj and Semenič under construction* with its curious aesthetic format as a site-specific performance. The performance's title already includes the names of the two female authors, who are also the protagonists of the piece. Both are active representatives of the independent contemporary Slovenian performing arts' scene. Simona Semenič predominantly works as a playwright, but was previously the artistic director of festival PreGlej na glas! and president of the cultural association Glej Theatre. Barbara Kapelj Osredkar<sup>2</sup> has carried out various roles in the non-governmental, independent scene, but mostly works with visual elements, as a scenographer. The performers' creative endeavours are inseparable from the developmental dynamics and production of alternative formats of experimental dramatics and their staging (between text and scenography) in the times of postdramatic theatre.

With its curious aesthetic format as a site-specific performance, *Kapelj and Semenič under construction* premièred on 25 May 2012 in Ljubljana, Slovenia, produced by a non-governmental organisation (NGO), the cultural organisation KD Integrali. The performance was located in a private house, at the performer's very home, that is, in her actual living unit. The spectator hence entered a framework that was both private and work-related. Both of the artists (Kapelj and Semenič) also work as self-employed freelancers, who have the status of being "self-employed in culture", which means they are simultaneously a physical entity and a business entity, an employer as well as an employee; thus, employing oneself. This dual role corresponds to the ideology of current neoliberal capitalism: "As Foucault explained in *The Birth of Biopolitics*, the starting point of the new ideology was the forced transformation of individuals into enterprises, the obligation to think in terms of the economy. You remember when Margaret Thatcher said that there is no such thing as society, and everybody has to be

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<sup>1</sup> Nika Leskovšek (39188), has been a part of the programmes "Young researchers" and "Theatre and Interart Studies" (P6-0376), both supported by the Slovenian Research Agency.

Nika Leskovšek (šifra 39188), vključena v program »Mladi raziskovalci« in (so)financirana s strani Javne agencije za raziskovalno dejavnost Republike Slovenije iz državnega proračuna ter v raziskovalni program "Gledališke in medumetniške raziskave" (P6-0376), (so)financiran s strani Javne agencije za raziskovalno dejavnost Republike Slovenije iz državnega proračuna.

<sup>2</sup> Known also as Barbara Kapelj.

a capitalist. So I have been obliged to become a capitalist” (Berardi 201). In practice, the status of self-employed can lead to paradoxical situations.<sup>3</sup> Especially so, if one is also the CEO of an NGO – as Semenič was in Glej Theatre –, that would mean one has to sign contracts with oneself, as one as self-employed – employing him/herself – does in any case. Semenič’s text *Še me dej* (2009) further problematises this situation along with the increasing administration and the process of public tenders. Presented on Semenič’s website as *Do me twice*, it is an “autobiographical play about the play-writing process and the making of a theatre piece in the fund-applications oriented everyday life.” Hence, the tendering process and production conditions become inseparable from the artwork itself.

For precarious workers, such as those self-employed in culture, this has important consequences, especially in the time-space (work) experience. Not only does one become a capitalist, businessman and entrepreneur but also a producer and manager of one’s artistic work:

We know that following the precarisation process, the labourer is losing all control over his work. The labourer, in fact, disappears as a person in the process of labour, as the precarisation of work presupposes the dissociation of the individual – the physical, erotic, juridical, political individual – from the amount of time that his own life contains. You are no longer a person, you are the bearer of a certain amount of time. Persons are dissociated from their own time, they become two different things (Berardi 204–205).

What happens here is that the self-employed worker is at the same time dissociated from one’s private, personal life, or rather, as is demonstrated in the case of the participatory site-specific performing arts performance: one’s private life is immersed into one’s durational artwork, or rather, one’s own life becomes displayed as an artwork. This reality becomes further problematised when a full-time artist is at the same time a full-time (single) mother, which leads to the inevitable transgression of the traditionally and socially perceived role of the mother.

In her autobiographical text and performance *Jaz, žrtev* (i, the victim, 2007), among her personal, even intimate diseases, she lists and provocatively places mastitis (Semenič’s official website). She consequently problematises the potential pathology of the normative or traditional (post-Catholic) perception of the mother and motherhood as self-less, submissive, loving, even if that means the breastfeeding and suffering mother as the consequence. In the text she, therefore, humorously self-

<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the status of self-employed in culture is administratively regulated by the Ministry of Culture. In order to maintain the position of self-employed in culture one has to comply with strict work norms and on regular terms demonstrate one’s above-average qualitative (awards, reviews) and quantitative (number of works realised) qualifications for one’s artistic work. (In addition to that, one has to also demonstrate the financial under-privilege by not exceeding the given census for the full current period.) The conditions are written in detail on the official site of the Ministry of Culture (<https://www.gov.si/zbirke/storitve/vpis-v-razvid-samozaposlenih-v-kulturi/> Accessed: Nov. 2020) In case one gets sick and cannot provide one’s own means for survival, the status of self-employed in culture also regulates this bureaucratic procedure. This again is further thematised in Semenič’s text *drugič* (the second time) (2014).

diagnoses herself as an example of “SPKO/PCES (*sindrom postkatoliškega okolja/ post-catholic environment syndrome*)” or even “SNKV/DCVS (*sindrom nespoštovanja krščanskih vrednot/ disrespect of christian values syndrome*)” (*me slišiš?* 27; *can you hear me?* 27).

More precisely, the immersive staging of the text is crucially determined by Semenič’s position in public as an artist/playwright/writer, who works as a freelancer with the status of an independent, self-employed cultural worker and is at the same time a single mother of two and an epileptic (widely problematised in her autobiographical trilogy on victimhood, two of which were published in *me slišiš?*)<sup>4</sup>. She is also known for her work of giving voice exactly to these (precarious, deprived and often victimised) positions in society. At the same time, she problematises the predetermined narratives of their victimisation which frame them in a society constructed by the patriarchic logic, suffering “from the post-catholic environment syndrome”, as she calls it. (Ibid.)

As a result, the performance *Kapelj and Semenič under construction* offers to the spectator the particularised and personalised experience of the lives of female artists – as well as (single) mothers self-employed in culture – their integration into and determination by the processes of social normalisation (the post-Catholic reception of woman and mother) and bureaucratic regulation (self-employed in culture). Even more so, the performance is a textual exhibition that invites the immersion of the spectator into the private sphere of an artist. Thus, together with the two artists, the spectator inhabits the performance, its textual (Semenič) and scenographic (Kapelj) level. Site-specificity is here crucial for understanding the performance’s participation and politicality.

The politicality of the piece *Kapelj in Semenič under construction* will be analysed from the formal aspect (a site-specific, participatory art form of immersive theatre) which is inviting the spectator’s personal involvement, experience and participation as well as a certain autonomy of the emancipated spectator (Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*). Following this discussion will be an analysis of the organisational logic of station dramaturgy, which in *Kapelj and Semenič* references the way of sorrows and consequently the beginnings of the Slovenian dramatics and its liturgical origin *The Škofja Loka Passion Play*. The reference enables the artists an analysis of the female position in a society affected by (post-)Catholic values (the text displayed in the *Kapelj and Semenič* emphasised this through the reinterpretation of the motifs of the victimised and innocent “Blessed martyrs of Drina” (*Drinske mučenke*), in her text abused by politics and the institution in power). Kapelj and Semenič further reflect on the paradoxes and difficulties one stumbles across when merging the private position of a (single) mother with the public position of a self-employed artist. The content

<sup>4</sup> That is *i, the victim* (jaz, žrtev) and *the second time* (drugič), while the third part is yet to be performed.

of Semenič's displayed text radicalises this situation by presenting and ironising the concurrent socio-political situation that followed the global financial crisis of 2007–2009 and made conditions for art production even harsher. The paper will hence demonstrate the politicality of *Kapelj and Semenič* through the content of Semenič's text displayed in performance, as well as its formal structure of immersive theatre that enables different modes of the spectator's reception and one's interaction with both performers.

By that, it is important to emphasise that we understand the concept of politicality mostly through Ana Vujanović's interpretation. She established that a performance in its medium "can contest the legitimised production of signifiers, signifying orders, and habitualised orders of perception and reception, or even introduce new ones", which alone, without the necessity to "disclose any particular political content", is a sufficient condition for maintaining its "political potency" ("Thinking a grid of Politicality"). Meaning, we do not understand politicality only and strictly speaking within a performance's relation to everyday politics – here, those of 2012 (and its reflection). More so, we understand politicality by the performance's ability to introduce exactly these "new orders of reception", that is, the formal, spatial, mobile, participatory presentation of the performance, as well as the phenomenological, through the placement of both artists and spectators inside the performance. We are referring to the level of the presence that transgresses and is at the same time influenced by the processes of internalisation of social normalisation and bureaucratic regulation. These processes are also represented on the level of the fiction of Semenič's text. About the difference between the presence and representation in performance and corresponding modes of (phenomenological and semiotic) perception in spectator see Fischer-Lichte (*Estetika performativnega*, 240).<sup>5</sup>

We are conditionally placing the performance under the category of immersive theatre (further defined and discussed in the continuation of the article). Otherwise, the genre itself is difficult to define, since: "Immersive theatre' has become a widely adopted term to designate a trend for performances which use installations and expansive environments, which have mobile audiences, and which invite audience participation," noted Gareth White in his often referenced, extensive analysis on the phenomena ("On Immersive" 221). In *Kapelj and Semenič* it denotes an interactive, even participatory theatre format in which the spectator or participant is physically activated (even mobilised) by being invited to roam around the textual and architectural structure of the piece and allowing the spectator to inhabit it together with both performers. The performance willingly withdraws from the hierarchical spectator-performer relation structure, demanding from the spectator to take a somewhat emancipatory

<sup>5</sup> For the further difference between the level of materiality and semioticity or signified and signifier, please see Fischer-Lichte (*Transformative Power of Performance* 17).

(Rancière's *The Emancipated Spectator*) stance in the participatory art performance.

The spectator is relatively autonomous, s/he can individually and independently read and proceed through performance, interact with the performers, as well as self-manage the duration of one's performance participation.

Simultaneously, the performance pressures the participants with the demoralising content of Semenič's text, loosely referring to the concurrent socio-political situation in 2012 in the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2007–2009, which pushed the precarious self-employed workers to even worse working conditions, while also symbolically devaluing cultural and artistic work by attaching the independent Ministry of Culture to the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport in early 2012. The situation of disproportionate governmental austerity measures – not only in the cultural sector – escalated by the end of the year into mass protests. Semenič's text depicts the authoritarian strategies of the rulers in the times of the crisis. In the text, the time of the events remains deliberately undefined. The text is omnipresently exhibited in the rooms and hangs from the interior walls in the form of plaquettes, installed together with various incongruent (political and religious) ideologies: the Bible, Marx's *Kapital*, etc.

## The dramaturgical logic of the text installation/performance

The capacity of the spectators is limited to twenty, while they freely inhabit the house and are let inside the performance one by one in intervals of ten minutes. The duration of the performance is estimated to be four hours (as one can read from the technical rider of the performance application for the festival Week of Slovenian Drama)<sup>6</sup>. One can also read that it is the spectator who decides how long to remain in each of the rooms of the house/performance. The dramaturgical logic of the text-installation performance is also site-specific. The text, exhibited across the rooms of the house, borrows its logic from each room's functionality (e.g., in the child's room, the spectator playfully engages in a game of "hide and seek" to find the text; while in the other child's room, the spectator listens to a fairytale-like text on an audio cassette).

In terms of addressing the post-feminist logic, the strongest point is the last station, under the rooftop, where a pot of a veal soup is being cooked (a typical dish for Slovenian Sunday family lunch (eaten after Catholic mass); next to it, there is a bed with a cross above – made of two brooms. In this sense of post-feminism, the bedroom also comes to mind: above an empty bed frame (the mattress lies meaningfully on the

<sup>6</sup> For materials, technical rider of the performance I thank Simona Semenič. Information on the performance are also available on the official website (Semenič's website) and from the performance's review (Leskovšek, "Po trnovi poti umetnosti" *sigledal.org*).

balcony, where one can even smoke a cigarette) are portraits of both women (and mothers) depicted in a religious (Madonna-like) manner, yet erotically or sinfully revealing one of their breasts.<sup>7</sup> Referencing more Cindy Sherman's remake, found in MOMA under "Untitled #216" (1989) than Jean Fouquet's original "The Virgin and the Child" (1450), the portrait is here "parodying female stereotypes" ("Untitled #216" *MoMA*) when posing as the Virgin Mary with the baby Jesus by deliberately emphasising its artificiality. But not so much the artificiality of the photography but of the ways the construction of the female image is stereotypically designed (hence the word construction in the title of *Kapelj and Semenič under construction*, parodying their unsuccessful process of social, religious and bureaucratic normalisation and in this case its erotic even witty sexual transgression of the decent image of a mother)<sup>8</sup>. Sherman herself has said: "I was getting disgusted with the attitude of art being so religious or sacred." She wanted to make something "that anyone off the street could appreciate ... I wanted to imitate something out of the culture, and also make fun of the culture as I was doing it" (cited in "Untitled #216" *MoMA*).

The additional visual material in the bedroom reveals the installation below the portraits of milk cartons from a common Slovenian brand (Alpsko mleko), that remind more of the traditional branding of Slovenian national goods in the form of a politically-incorrect commercial. The living room set for a tea party in front of the television is formally symptomatic of the political intrusion into everyday life. The TV is switched on and shows parts of texts being read aloud in the form of daily TV news reports. The person reading the reports is Janez Janša, one of the three artists who renamed themselves into the name of the Slovenian Democratic Party (SDP) leader Janez Janša and also Slovenian prime minister at the time of the première of *Kapelj and Semenič*. Thus, the artists were bringing the actual political context into the meta-level of the text. The announcement of the renaming as Janez Janša was made public on 11 August 2007 with the performative act "Wedding" (also referred to as "The Marriage"), when Janez Janša got married, with the two best men at the wedding being Janez Janša and Janez Janša ("The Marriage", janezjansa.si). At the same time, this identity multiplication or rather "Over-multiplication" that "starts to function as homonym" (Milohnič, "Ready-name" 124) caused the spectator to question the conventional logic of signifiers in the performance and the representational structure set in the textual exhibition of the piece.

The direction of the spectator's path in *Kapelj and Semenič* is marked – more in terms of regulating traffic as the spectators enter this dramatic installation one-by-one in ten-minute intervals – after that, however, the spectator is free to wander around. S/he randomly (if s/he pleases) joins the conversation with the other spectators whom

<sup>7</sup> See MOMA. <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/50744>. Accessed 2 November 2020.

<sup>8</sup> The erotic dimensions of the image of a female, mother are further hinted at in the performance in the cellar with pornographic visual material and the laundry room with its display of underwear.

s/he haphazardly meets inside the installation. A spectator may also communicate with both of the female authors who are strategically incorporated in the gender-stereotyped installation: one in the kitchen (baking and making corrections of her text aloud); and the other in the bathroom (with only Nutella sensually slathered on her skin). This very phenomenological placement of the spectators' and artistic' bodies into the semiotic structure of theatre text and the standardisation of one's home into a place of artistic residence and public performance for the need of bureaucracy and market regulation already enables the materialising and externalising of the governing dispositifs in society and the artists' own placement inside the structure. It demonstrates both their political break with the rigid semiotic structure of the exhibited dramatic text and the object of its critique – meaning the political situation of 2012 – and the break with the ideologically promoted dominant narratives. The socio-political context of 2012, following the austerity measures after the global economic and financial crisis (2007–2009), even hardened the material and financial conditions for art production.

In the next section, I will delve a bit deeper into the articulation of the politicality in *Kapelj and Semenič under construction* upon placing this aesthetic format of immersive performance inside the historical context and the Slovenian dramatic tradition. In doing so, I emphasise the aesthetic format of station dramaturgy, its adherent spatial performative strategies and physical mobilisation of the spectator. I also shortly delve into the content of Semenič's play/text, which is exhibited in the space of the performance, and its critical reference to the Slovenian political situation in 2012 and the post-effects of the global and economic crisis (2009).

## Historical contextualisation

The site-specificity, participation, as well as immersion, and physical mobility of the spectator inside the architectural structure of the performance is not without precedent in the history of the Slovenian performing arts. However, such practices are not as popular or common in Slovenia as similar immersive performances across European stages (UK, Germany, France, Netherlands ...).<sup>9</sup> One of the most famous and influential political immersive performances are perhaps those directed by Ljubiša Ristić: *Igrajte tumor v glavi in onesnaženje zraka* (Play a Tumour in the Head and Air Pollution) (Celje City Theatre, 1976) and *Romeo in Julija – Komentarji* (Romeo and Juliet – Commentaries) (Mladinsko Theatre, 1983). In both performances, Ristić

<sup>9</sup> The immersive theatre in Slovenia is far from commercially successful. In the case of immersive theatre, the only commercial approximation in Slovenia would be the group Sensorium, self-defined as sensory theatre, a kind of experiential theatre, in which spectators are usually blindfolded and are led around the site-specific location, stopping individually or in a group for a certain "experience". The character of this kind of performances is usually – but not necessarily – close to rituals (for example, the performance *Unveiling* in 2006, attempted to enact the ancient Eleusinian Mysteries). Here, the emphasis is on other senses, such as: olfactory, tactile and audible.

occupies the entire theatre building with the performers and spectators by using the principle of immersive theatre and audience mobility and interaction. Whereas, in terms of the spatial concept, Marušič described Ristič's usage of the space in this particular aesthetic period of his political and "postmodernist directing" (Lukan "Ristič v Sloveniji"): "Innovative spatial interventions (in the sense of Craig's empty space) are characteristic of Ristič's director's aesthetics; the approach which created the common spaces of the audience and actors generated a subversive political space and in doing so enacted Ristič's concept of world change" (Marušič "Levitan Vitomila Zupana" 89).<sup>10</sup>

When staging Dušan Jovanović's play *Igrajte tumor v glavi in onesnaženje zraka: igra v treh dejanjih: in memoriam pobijavca ščurkov*, Ristič formally responds to the content of the play, which addresses the uprisal of the actors and internal ideological conflicts in the theatre, dividing the artistic from the political/ideological board. The promenade started outside of the theatre in the independent, free zone of a newspaper office. Afterwards, the audience was taken station by station to the scenes and rooms of the occupied theatre.

Apart from such political performative predecessors, the project *Kapelj and Semenič under construction* is formally (and content-wise) strongly rooted in the beginnings of Slovenian dramatics. These are historically connected to the format of station dramaturgy, developed from the Passion Play, an initially religious genre of liturgical drama from medieval times and historically closely interwoven to the genealogy of Slovenian dramatics. In her drama, as well as with the very format of the *Kapelj and Semenič* performance, Semenič undoubtedly references the way of sorrows and hence the *Škofja Loka Passion Play*. "The first preserved Slovenian theatre text under the title *Instructio Processione Locopolitana in die Parasceves*" (Marin "Škofjeloški pasijon" 192). Authored by Father Romuald (Lovrenc Marušič Romuald), it was staged for the first time in 1721 in Slovenian language (and then used for the "organization of processions in Škofja Loka between 1721–1765" (Ibid.)).<sup>11</sup> The content of the *Passion Play* depicts Biblical stories from the life of the Jesus or "depicting Jesus Christ's suffering and death", as is written about "The Škofja Loka Passion Play Collection" on the official website of the museum Loški muzej Škofja Loka. This is divided into 13 different tableaux. Likewise, the performance *Kapelj and Semenič and under construction* contains 13 or even 14 different stations (as in the way of sorrows) – it formally follows the logic of station dramaturgy. It is, however, thematically

10 "Za Rističevu režisersko estetiko so značilne inovativne prostorske intervencije (v smislu Craigovega praznega prostora); pristop, ki je ustvarjal skupne prostore publike in igralcev, je general subverzivni politični prostor ter s tem udejanjal Rističev koncept spremembe sveta" (Marušič 89).

11 Staged with approximately 640 amateur actors and actresses (the number varies from performance to performance and is nowadays even rising) and then reconstructed in 1936. It was initially planned to be performed again in 2021, celebrating 300 years since its world premiére). Since 2016 "the Škofja Loka Passion Play was inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity" (Loški muzej Škofja Loka website).

very loosely based on the content. Also technically, *Kapelj and Semenič* gives the spectators the autonomy to freely move around the household or the artwork, which is an important development and de-hierarchisation in the artist-spectator relation.<sup>12</sup> Otherwise, the Stations of the Cross are content-wise often metaphorically referenced in Semenič's work: "i want to say that art is the way of sorrows, i am christ and art is the cross" (Semenič, *me slišiš?* 83; *can you hear me?* 85). In the case of this particular performance *Kapelj and Semenič*, the original message is deliberately generalised and ironised. The salvation after the last stop "the Holy Sepulchre" remains amidst the remaining housework and artwork, the boiling stew in the pot and a cross built out of the two brooms, dubious. Atmospherically, the scene is more reminiscent of witchcraft and the eternal punishment for one's sins (the spectator can remain inside the house and repeat the procedure as long as s/he likes). The placement of the bodies and dramatic text into stereotypically female tasks (laundry, cooking, baking, beauty session in the bathroom, playing in the children room, but also working on the text behind the computer, making corrections to the text in the kitchen, etc.) deliberately emphasises the specifically female environment but also echoes the masculinisation of the Slovenian dramatic tradition and of the genre of drama, the mostly late breakthrough of women playwrights into Slovenian institutional awarding mechanisms (Leskovšek, "Institucionalizacija slovenačke ženske" 192).<sup>13</sup>

Apart from these spatially influential aesthetic formats, which are also telling content-wise and respond as well as to evoke specific socio-political and ideological, even patriarchal and post-Catholic, contexts, *Kapelj and Semenič under construction* can also be read as one of the stages in the development of a particular format of inventive public presentation and staging of an experimental (no-longer-dramatic) "theatre text" (Poschmann, "Gledališki tekst" 100). Simona Semenič was, namely, one of the co-founders, as well as the artistic director and an active participant, of PreGlej (as a part of the Glej Theatre), a laboratory of drama writing. At the same time, this was also a platform for the production of (no-longer) dramatic theatre texts, their promotion, as well as the development of performative strategies for their presentation. Later, the platform manifested in the form of the festival Preglej na glas! The platform was not only crucial in the development of different aesthetic approaches to contemporary dramatic writing (in the sense of *der Nicht mehr dramatische Theatertext*, a concept of Gerda Poschmann, *Der Nicht mehr dramatische Theatertext*), an incubator for promoting several young authors. It also developed various low-budget production formats of public presentation on the non-governmental scene that met the demands of authors for public presentation with the actual state of the miserable financial situation of non-governmental production. Most of those production formats were

<sup>12</sup> In the *Škofja Loka Passion Play* the situation is vice versa: the actors are moving, thus building the tableaux, while the spectators remain in fixed position either standing or seated.

<sup>13</sup> Together with Žanina Mirčevska in 2009 and, before that, Dragica Potočnjak in 2007, Semenič was one of the first women to win the Slavko Grum Award, annually presented for the best new Slovenian Play since 1979.

intermediary forms between rehearsals and final stage performance: public reading or reading performance (so-called *bralne uprizoritve, bralke*), ad hoc performances, work-in-progress performances, later also miniature performances appeared (*miniaturke*), etc. Formally speaking, *Kapelj and Semenič under construction* can hence be seen as a successor of these alternative formats, which is helping to develop them further on.

## Political content and the critique of the local political context

*Kapelj and Semenič under construction* was staged in the times of the after-effects and collateral damage of the global economic and financial crisis (2009), which sparked protests even in the local context resounding with the 2012/13 wave of protests in Eastern Europe (from Ukraine: later EuroMaidan, Romania, Bulgaria, etc.), following the austerity measures after the global economic crisis (2008/9). “Known as a quiet and stable Alpine country, Slovenia seemed an unlikely place for such protests,” Al Jazeera reported (“Eastern Europe: A year of protest”). Despite that, by the official reports, a mass of 20,000 people gathered (Ti. Kr.). This period is metaphorically depicted via the content of Semenič’s text *medtem ko skoraj rečem še ali prilika o vladarju in modrosti/while i almost ask for more or the parable of the ruler and wisdom*, which was exhibited in *Kapelj and Semenič*. Staged “many many years ago”, the text criticises the autocratic principles of the ruling government on the one side and starving people on the other, or, in the words of the author: “A surrealist play about the decay of those in power and their unrelenting resolve to maintain their sovereignty, no matter the cost” (Semenič’s website). The text itself was later staged in the Slovenian National Theatre Drama Ljubljana (2015), gaining more publicity and more reviews.<sup>14</sup> In one of the reviews we can read: “[A] dark, horrifying half-fairytale about the government’s careless playing out the nation, reduced to rebels, needed to be silenced, or submissive subjects and a means of ruling power games” (Arhar “Ocenjujemo: medtem”).<sup>15</sup> As the plot of the play suggests, the state mercilessly plays out a strategic political manoeuvre to avoid the mass demonstrations, by finding “the scapegoat” in the form of three virgin sisters (in the text with allegorical names Hope/Nada, Faith/Vera and Love/Ljuba, their mother being Sophia/Wisdom/Sofija). All three were sexually abused and tortured to death by state representatives – which was made seen as an act of the state’s enemy –, and later declared martyrs by the (same) state. On top of that, to radically play out the perverseness of the situation, Sophia/Wisdom marries the sovereign, Vladimir (the name a composite of the Slovenian words for “government or to govern”, *vlada/vladati*, and “peace”, *mir*) at the end.

<sup>14</sup> Only one review was written about *Kapelj and Semenič* (Leskovšek, “Po trnovi poti umetnosti” *sigledal.org*).

<sup>15</sup> “[T]emačna, grozljiva pol-pravljica o brezbržnem poigravanju oblasti z narodom, zreduciranim na upornike, ki jih je potrebno utišati, ali podrejene podanike in sredstvo vladajoče igre moči” (Arhar “Ocenjujemo: medtem”).

Semenič took the motif of the three martyr sisters from the actual “Blessed martyrs of Drina” (*Drinske mučenke*)<sup>16</sup> who died during World War II, to keep their virginity in the face of Chetniks in 1941 in Goražde. Five Catholic nuns (two Slovenian, a Croatian, an Austrian and a Hungarian) – together with their priest, also a Slovenian, the writer Franc Ksaver Meško, who later reported about the event (Štefanič, “Križev pot”) – were abducted by the Chetniks. Meško, however, was rescued from these – as he later called them – “Stations of the Cross” (Stations of the Cross is also referenced in the aesthetic format of the performance). The process of the nuns’ beatification was running just around the time when Semenič was writing her text *medtem ko skoraj* exhibited in *Kapelj and Semenič*. The martyred nuns were beatified in September 2011 (“Martyred nuns beatified in Bosnia”).

Concluding from all this, content-wise, the politicality of the *Kapelj and Semenič under construction* coincides with a cross-section of the concrete political context (post-crisis recession), religious form (passion play), the historical role of the women in Catholic religion and society (submissive, victimised, even martyr, but also preserving intact, pure and innocent image), and the status and function of Slovenian dramatics at the same time (being financially underprivileged, marginalised or obsolete) in the times of postdramatic theatre (Hans-Thies Lehmann), as well as the precariousness of the non-governmental performing arts scene. However, the specific politicality of the piece (and all of its contents mentioned above) must be treated through its formal aesthetic and immersive staging.

## The setting of the site-specific performance

*Kapelj and Semenič under construction* takes place in an unconventional site-specific staging itself. Instead of using the more usual placement of site-specific performances – especially when they are dealing with socio-political issues – into post-industrial or other functional, but still institutional, places known for Fordistic production, such as former warehouses, factories, etc.), the *Kapelj and Semenič* installation took place in the author’s private residence, in the domestic environment of her actual house. That was done mostly because of the lack of spatial infrastructure for rehearsing and performing on the non-governmental performing arts’ scene, as well as optimisation of time and finances. The performance is located at the address which is the private residence of one of the performers. Thus, it demonstrates the intersection of the private, legal and public, which deconstructs the specific bureaucratic regulation

<sup>16</sup> The Blessed Martyrs of Drina (*Drinske mučenke*): Sisters of the Congregation of the Daughters of Divine Charity, who lost their lives during World War II. Four were killed when they jumped out of a window in Goražde on 15 December 1941, reportedly to keep their virginity in the face of Chetniks, and the last was killed by the Chetniks in Sjetlina the following week. The five nuns were later declared martyrs and beatified by Pope Benedict XVI on 24 September 2011 (articles in *Dnevnik*, *Radio Ognjišče*, *Družina*). There were many reports on them by writer and Slovenian priest Franc Ksaver Meško and by F. Bakovic.

and everyday functioning of a self-employed cultural worker that is at the same time a physical and a business entity. Hence, the spectator has to establish whether the invitation into the house is hosted privately (open door day), since the number of participants is reduced to a minimum, or is this a public art event. There is no definite answer. The line is deliberately blurred.

The politicality of the project *Kapelj and Semenič under construction* derives from two aspects. First, from the contextualisation, the framing of life itself, which in this case is private and not public, since the site-specific place that we are entering is Semenič's actual residence. Second, from the reference to the post-global crisis political context in which she is living and the (female) artist's position in it. The (spectators') immersion that occurs in the performance is the everyday life of the protagonist and author of the same play. The politicality of the performance originates from the textual content (reflecting the crisis) as well as the physical placement of two female artists (and their spectators). In a performative sense, the phenomenological aspect breaks with the semiotic, textual construction of the installation. Therefore the performance in its medium "can contest the legitimized production of signifiers, signifying orders, and habitualised orders of perception and reception, or even introduce new ones", which alone, without the necessity to "disclose any particular political content", is a sufficient condition for maintaining the "political potency" of the performance according to Ana Vujanović ("Thinking a grid of Politicality"). Namely, while, at first glance, the piece may merely spatially represent her private position in the political structure, this (domestic) placement itself is in the line of the text's "attacks" the very treatment of the social categories that she (willy nilly) represents (mother, self-employed, cultural worker) as well as their social and bureaucratic normalisation/regulation. The latter needs to be followed to keep up with the work norm set by the funder, and the sufficient number of artistic works need to be materialised/realised, regardless of the infrastructural conditions to do so. The alternative solution the performance therefore offers is a display of the private life of self-employed in culture.

## Politicality in the framework of immersive theatre production

Thus far, the performance format of immersive theatre in Slovenia is more closely connected to what M. Carlson calls a promenade performance<sup>17</sup>, denoting a

17 I am borrowing the useful threefold distinction inside the types of immersive theatre and how they address the audiences, as provided by Carlson, applying to immersive theatre "the utilization of unconventional audience arrangements." ("Immersive theatre") In his article "Immersive Theatre and the Reception Process" Carlson placed the immersive theatre in relation to the already existing historical experimental theatre practices of the sixties and the seventies, like environmental theatre (R. Schechner). In terms of audience treatment Carlson separates three types of "immersive performances" in his article "Postdramatic Theatre and Postdramatic Performance":

- While the first one should be called "promenade productions", in which spectators are taken in a pre-determined order to different rooms, where they see a conventional, mimetic play; ("Postdramatic Theatre" 586)

- In the second productions, the spectators are free to move around, while the performance runs in one or several "more or

performance in which spectators are taken in a predetermined order to different rooms to see a conventional, mimetic play ("Postdramatic Theatre"). The politicality of the *Kapelj and Semenič* piece can also be extracted from the comparison to other Slovenian immersive or promenade performances.

This format description also applies to *Vražji triptih/The Devil's Triptych*<sup>18</sup> (premiered on 1 June 2018, directed by Matija Solce) by the Ljubljana Puppet Theatre, one of the other very rare cases of immersive (or more precisely promenade) theatre. The production, loosely based on Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*, marked the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Ljubljana Puppet Theatre in 2018 (with the use of masks and object theatre). Here, the inaugural scene of Margarita welcoming the historical figures at the Devil's midnight ball was staged as the history of Slovenian puppetry with the participation of the Partisan Singing Choir (Partizanski pevski zbor) and the Academic Choir of Vinko Vodopivec (Primorski akademski zbor Vinko Vodopivec), as well as by Jani Kovačič singing his famous song *Revolucija* (Revolution).<sup>19</sup>

The song originates from the 1980s, yet, it was the re-contextualisation of the song in 2012 and 2013 during the so-called "Protestival", an artistic intervention into the mass demonstrations in Slovenia when Kovačič re-played the song, that brought the actual political context into the performance's content. Kovačič was at the Protestival together with Matija Solce, the director of *The Devil's Triptych*, who involved puppeteers, musicians, large puppets and masks to embrace the peaceful as well as the artistic dimensions of the political protests. It is peculiar here to notice that both of these examples of immersive theatre *Kapelj and Semenič* as well as *The Devil's Triptych* reference the socio-political context of the same period of 2012. Apart from that, the protesting was aimed at and also emphasised the deliberate symbolical and financial devalorisation of culture in times of crisis. At that time, for the first time in the history of independent Slovenia, the country (temporarily) lost its separate and dedicated Ministry of Culture. This was exactly the reason for staging *Kapelj and Semenič*: to emphasise the specific role of the precarious female cultural worker in the times of crisis. To demonstrate that in a politically efficient way, ensuring his/her personal experience, the spectator needed to be placed inside the site-specific and immersive construction of the performance.

less contiguous locations" (again, we are speaking of mimetic, texted performance); ("Postdramatic Theatre" 587)

- The third are performances such as the ones from Punchdrunk, in which one can wander around and occasionally experience one-on-one performance, while in other rooms the performance is happening independently of the spectator. (Ibid.)

18 *The Devil's Triptych* was actually a part of the event *Mojster in Margareta*, which consisted of two performances, performed in two consecutive evenings: *The Devil's Triptych* (directed by Matija Solce) – *Vražji triptih* was also translated as *Develish Triptych* - and a theatre gospel *Margareta* (directed by Mirjana Medojevič). Later on, the shorter version of *The Devil's Triptych* was presented individually as autonomous part under the title *Seansa Bulgakov*. Of all these versions, only *The Devil's Triptych* can be defined as promenade theatre.

19 The song, initially from the 1980s, depicts the ideological affirmation and merging with the (original) Revolution (in texts from Marx and Engels), here in the anthropomorphic shape of a female figure.

## Conclusion

The politicality of the Slovenian examples of “immersive theatre”, which lean more towards promenade theatre (Ristić, Solce), could be defined in terms of more “traditional approaches”, meaning, they symptomatically lean on dissecting the concrete political environment, while simultaneously placing the spectator inside the spatial representation of (political) power relations exhibited daily on the political body. These Slovenian examples still rest on the logic of the internal – content-wise and text-oriented – criticism of institutional power-relation distribution. In these promenade productions, the politicality of the piece is connected mostly to the textual content of the performances. Even in *The Devil's Triptych* as an example of the theatre of objects (that were also used in *Protestival*), the play is set in the conventional, mimetic manner and the route of spectators' is predetermined. In the cases of Ristić and Solce, the spectators are still taken to different locations inside the theatre, where they witness the mimetic performance.

However, in *Kapelj and Semenič* the spectator is relatively autonomous and free to move around, the installation performance is happening independently of the spectator, s/he can even freely interact with both of the artists. *Kapelj and Semenič's* politicality differs from other examples and can be, hence, placed into the immersive performance by Marvin Carlson's categorisation. It is also the metaphorical textual referencing to the political context as well as the autobiographic elements of both artists, with which the spectator should be familiar before entering the performance, that enables the political “reading” of the performance. Blurring the line between private and public as well as the phenomenological placement (of both the artists' and spectators' bodies) inside the semiotic construction of the performance enables the deconstruction of the firm representational structure of the hierarchical societal relations represented in the text.

Politicality is represented here by the precarious private position of both of the artists with their vulnerable and unstable financial status (female self-employed cultural worker, during the political-economic and financial crisis and even single mother). This (kind of politics) reveals the private through the example and representation of an individual working in the cultural sector, and, by the same act, deconstructs the financial position and situation of that same sector. The performance also references the majority of Semenič's works, in which she calls into question the socially normative position of the mother, the health-impaired and the freelance cultural worker, their victimhood, as well as the victimisation of all these three categories. Moreover, she also problematises the ease of falling into the (self-)victimisation promoted by the bureaucratic apparatus of authorities. It is no coincidence that Semenič categorises the genre of her text exhibited in *Kapelj and Semenič* as a parable.

The strategies in *Kapelj and Semenič* aim at the physical engagement of the spectator and one's inhabitation of the private space, which enables a different experience. The site-specific location in both cases functions as a manifestation of the distribution of concrete power relations, its spatial representation. To speak about the politicality of the piece, the spectator here still needs to rationally and metaphorically interpret its content, which is crucially connected to the place of its enactment – its site-specificity. Mostly, the spectator is invited to take part in the fictional world (of the everyday life) of the artist.

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