

Vanishing identities in contemporary Lithuanian art

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The article analyses the problem of national and gender identity, using examples from Lithuanian contemporary art. It raises the question of how to speak about national or gender identities and discusses the nature of any identity in general. The article is based on the anti-essentialist assumption that any identity is both contingent and relational in character. Any identity functions as an empty signifier, which has no stable content and is constantly redefined in the symbolic order. So, instead of speaking about identity *per se*, we should rather focus on the process of identification and ask, “Who is this Other?” for whom the subject is enacting its role. When interpreting national or gender identities we should ask: whose gaze is considered when the subject identifies himself/herself with a certain image? Slavoj Žižek makes a distinction between imaginary identification, i. e. identification with the image in which we appear likeable to ourselves, and symbolic identification, i. e. identification with the very place from where we look at ourselves so that we appear to ourselves likeable. According to this definition, national identity as well as gender identity can be interpreted as a masquerade played for the gaze of “the Other”. This means that not only national, but also gender identity is constantly redefined by different regimes of power.

Key words: national identity, gender identity, identification, otherness, the gaze of the Other

NATIONAL IDENTITY AND OTHERNESS

I propose to discuss national identity in terms of imaginary identification and fantasy rather than in terms of its essence or nature. Slavoj Žižek takes the notion of fantasy from the field of psychoanalysis and redefines it in the ideological context. Žižek points out that “fantasy functions as a construction, as an imaginary scenario filling out the void, the opening of the *desire of the Other*” (Žižek 1989: 114). Fantasy enables us to evade the submission to the Other’s desire and to counter it by inventing imaginary roles. From this it follows that every identity is some sort of imaginary scenario, some sort of fantasy, which is constructed as an answer to the question “What does the Other want?” Here we can configure different strategies in relation to the Other: identification with the Other or distancing from the Other. The need for identification arises because there is no identity, as Ernesto Laclau points out (1996: 56). The need for identification is caused by the impossibility of any stable or fixed identity. The so-called “pure identities” should be regarded either as an effect of some political power or as a result of performative practices. The notion of performativity, which was developed and broadly discussed by Judith Butler, helps to explain the retroactive nature of any stable identity. In her later works, for example, in *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (1997) Butler demonstrates that every political

identity functions by virtue of repetition and citation. That means that someone can acquire a certain identity only by repeating and citing some rituals and norms. Looked at from this perspective, every political (or gendered) action seems like acting, like an artistic practice. And *vice versa*: only an artistic action can present identities in their pure form.

The mechanism of performative practices is explored in the works of Artūras Raila, a Lithuanian artist. Interpreting Raila’s performances we see how identity and performative action are interwoven. On one hand, we can say that Raila is citing political identities that really exist in our socio-political space. On the other hand, he stages them in the art scene and in this way makes visible the identities, that usually try to evade the public gaze or are conceived as unworthy of our active investigation. In the exhibition *Walls for NATO* (Contemporary Art Centre, Vilnius, 2001), Raila presented unemployed men as an art work: he hired four unemployed men whom he had met outside the employment bureau and paid them the money allocated for the realization of his work for the exhibition. In the exhibition *Cool Places* (CAC, Vilnius, 1998), Raila intended to install the office of the Lithuanian nationalist party and introduce its leader Mindaugas Murza, famous for his fascist inclinations. This performance was canceled before the opening of the exhibition, because the performative action was understood as a direct propaganda of nationalist ideas. From this example we can see that it is

impossible to distinguish between the performative nature of any identity and an artwork that simply performs or cites this identity.

As far as this Other for whom the subject is playing its role is not definitely identifiable or can be constantly changing, we can also foresee some situations where identification fails or is felt as being incomplete or inadequate. Let's take as an example the latest wave of emigration. The emigrant's point of view can be described as an "error in perspective", an anamorphic element (Žižek 1989: 99) which distorts the otherwise balanced view of society. For example, artist and author Paulina Pukytė, recently living in London, published a selection of essays entitled *Their Habits* (2005). It is a vision of London seen from the perspective of a foreigner and presented in a distorted, let's say anamorphic way. The gaze of the foreigner is inscribed into the image of London in such a way that the city looks like a strange, forbidding place full of ridiculous habits, things and rules. Another interesting reflection on emigration is the recent advertising of a cell phone card "Ežys" on Lithuanian TV. The advertisement consists of four video clips that depict two Lithuanian guys from the countryside (speaking with a funny dialect) wandering around in London. Here we find the same strategy of an anamorphic gaze: everything that we perceive as a trait of "casual" England is interpreted by them as a proof that London is an awful, weird place. Each video ends up with the slogan: "London takes your joyfulness away, but 'Ežys' gives it back. Think before you emigrate". Either positive or negative, these reflections are an attempt to maintain a sense of national identity and a personal (although sometimes limited) point of view in the changing geopolitical situation.

Another possible position in relation to the Other is identification with the place from where we are being observed. As Žižek points out, "apropos of every imitation of a model-image, apropos of every 'playing a role', the question to ask is: *for whom* is the subject enacting this role? Which *gaze* is considered when the subject identifies himself with a certain image?" (Žižek 1989: 106) Here we can observe that some identities are enacted precisely for the "Western Other" in whose eyes the subject perceives himself as a stranger or an exotic other. This is the practice of self-exotisation, the practice of acting or playing the masquerade for the "Western Other". Films of the Lithuanian film director Šarūnas Bartas provide a good example of this self-exotisation. All his films, from the first film *The Corridor* (1994) to the last one *Seven Invisible Men* (2005), depict marginal characters who rarely speak but spend their time drinking, smoking, and staring at the wall. These films create the image of "Soviet existentialism" and in this way try to close the gap opened by the question, "What does the Western Other want from us?" It's not accidentally that foreign companies are the co-producers of these films: they function like commodities produced precisely for the Western market. The same tendency could be observed in contem-

porary video art as well: as an example, we can take the videos by Gintaras Makarevičius (*Naicai* 2002) or Eglė Rakauskaitė (*Gariūnai* 2002). This ideology of self-exotisation becomes even obscene in the case of Evaldas Jansas's video *Family video: Eastern* (CAC, Vilnius, 2004), in which the artist films his relatives meeting during the Easter Holiday. The artist takes the position of an "ethnographer" investigating the "savage"; one of them coincidentally saw the exhibition in Vilnius and immediately demanded to end the exhibition of the video. As art critic Erika Grigoravičienė points out, "the lessons of multiculturalism were learned by our artists... They make the international audience meet Lithuanian marginals. But do they realize that they themselves are becoming the products of political phantasms of Europeanism? Do they analyze the on-going ethnic hierarchization and asymmetry of the European space?" (Grigoravičienė 2005: 19).

Is it possible to overcome this feeling of being the exotic other, of finding oneself never in the right place, always inadequate in one or another sense? The answer can be positive if we renounce the concept of identity and accept the relative character of every identity. As Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe point out, "a conception which denies any essentialist approach to social relations must also state the precarious character of every identity and the impossibility of fixing the sense of the 'elements' in any ultimate literality" (Laclau, Mouffe 1985: 96). Any identity is relative, because it is constantly over-determined in the symbolic order, i. e. its content is always changing. "Society and social agents lack any essence, and their regularities merely consist of the relative and precarious forms of fixation which accompany the establishment of a certain order" (Laclau, Mouffe 1985: 98). We can say that art's function is precisely to question any fixed and stable meanings and to demonstrate the relational nature of any identity. For example, Lithuanian artist Audrius Novickas explores the notion of national identity in his installation entitled *Tricolour sets* (CAC, Vilnius, 2005). The installation reflects on the tricolour flag as a national symbol of Lithuania and its role in the formation of national identity. How unique is our national identity? The artist provides the answer by finding all the flags that use the same tricolor combination: the installation consists of the flags of Benin, Bolivia, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Congo, Ethiopia, Guinea, Lithuania, Mali, and Senegal. As a result of this reproduction, Lithuania happens to be the third country in the world that officially announced the red, green and yellow tricolour for its national flag.¹ This re-contextua-

¹ Bolivia was the first country to declare the tricolor flag for its national symbol in 1888. The second country to raise a green-yellow-red flag was Ethiopia in 1898. Lithuania was the third to officially announce the tricolour for its national flag in 1918 and remains the only country in Europe with this schema. In that Ethiopia was the only country in Africa that avoided colonization, the combination of the yellow, green and red became a model of liberation and started to be considered as Pan-African colours.

lisation of the Lithuanian and African national flags reveals the contingent and relational character of national identity and ironically reminds us of Kazimieras Pakštas' idea to remove Lithuania to the island of Madagascar in Africa. Another interesting example of the practice of re-contextualisation is the series of drawings of Mindaugas Lukošaitis, entitled *Resistance* (Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 2005). The drawings, which depict post-world war II guerrilla resistance, are put in a series like comics, and look like a western action movie. This comic-book form functions like a filter suppressing the otherwise traumatic content.

FEMININE IDENTITY AND OTHERNESS

What is the relationship between national identity and gender identity? Can we speak about gender identity in the same way as we do apropos national identity? Can we keep saying that every identity is of relative nature, if everyone automatically knows the answer to the question what gender means? I think that even in discussing gender we can maintain our definition of identity as being relational; if gender identities are fixed and stabilized, this should be regarded not as "natural condition", but as an effect of patriarchal power relations. Gender roles, as well as national roles, are played *for the Other*, so before starting to analyse gender roles we should ask for whom these roles are being enacted. Lacanian psychoanalysis and feminist film critique demonstrated explicitly that the "play of imagination" is always enacted for the gaze of the Other. Žižek interprets this gap as a split between imaginary and symbolic identification: imaginary identification is the identification with the image in which we appear likeable to ourselves, and symbolic identification is the identification with the very place from where we are being observed, from where we look at ourselves so that we appear to ourselves likeable (Žižek 1989: 105). So the distinction between imaginary and symbolic identifications would be that between the feminine masquerade and the paternal gaze: "Behind an extremely 'feminine' imaginary figure, we can thus generally discover some kind of masculine, paternal identification: she is enacting fragile femininity, but on the symbolic level she is in fact identified with the paternal gaze, to which she wants to appear likeable" (Žižek 1989: 106). As Peggy Phelan points out, the image of the woman serves as a screen for male fantasy: "The fetishized image of the female star serves as a deeply revealing *screen* for the construction of men's desire. The image of the woman displays not the subjectivity of the woman who is seen, but rather the constituent forces of desire of the man who wants to see her" (Phelan 1996: 26).

How are gender images constructed in Eastern Europe? Who is this Other for whom women are enacting their roles? Paradoxically, in the domain of the symbolic power we can find two different Others: the Other of the Soviet totalitarian regime in which women were forcefully represented as political agents ("a worker", "a farmer"),

and the capitalist "Western Other" representing women as objects of desire. Of course, the first, totalitarian Other is denied and neglected in recent political discourse. At the same time any attempt to represent women as political agents is neglected inclusively. This could be one of the reasons why feminism has never been a political priority in Lithuania. The attempt to restore the nation state with all the traditional values of nation, homeland and family prevented the otherwise "natural" processes of emancipation. Paradoxically enough, this totalitarian Other, even being politically outdated and invalid, is still calculated in the economy of visibility. The lack of the political representations of femininity signals that the gaze of totalitarian Other still persists in the economy of visibility and regulates what could be seen and what should remain invisible. Of course, the preference is given to the so-called second Other, that of the capitalist consuming fetishistic gaze: this gaze is omnipresent not only because of old patriarchal traditions, but also because the capitalist regime is conceived in post-Soviet Lithuania as the only possible way of political and social existence, as a kind of "natural" condition.

How to evade this double Gaze? How to invent new forms of visibility? The problem here is that anyone speaking about non-patriarchal, non-sexist and non-totalitarian representations should act like Mata Hari and invent a double strategy of non-visibility, though even this double strategy does not guarantee an adequate representation. On the one hand, some feminists insist on making visible some "invisible" groups: ethnic or sexual minorities, disabled or aged people. But does this "visibility" turn them into real political agents? Or, on the other hand, we can imagine some resistance to the fetishist consuming gaze; but does this resistance change the constellation of power? In this context, I would like to discuss Peggy Phelan's concept of "active vanishing", which is sort of a compromise between the condition of being unmarked and the condition of being represented: "I am not suggesting that continued invisibility is the 'proper' political agenda for the disenfranchised, but rather that the binary between the power of visibility and the impotence of invisibility is falsifying. There is real power in remaining unmarked; and there are serious limitations to visual representation as a political goal" (Phelan 1996: 6). Phelan speaks about "active vanishing" or "active disappearance", which should be understood as a resistance to the existing forms of representation: "I am speaking here of an active vanishing, a deliberate and conscious refusal to take the payoff of visibility. For the moment, active disappearance usually requires at least some recognition of what and who is not there to be effective" (Phelan 1996: 19).

Thus, returning to the problem of the double gaze of the Other we can presuppose that in order to escape from this double surveillance we should invent some sort of "double vanishing" or "double disappearance". Female contemporary artists provide interesting examples

of this double strategy in their artworks. Here I would like to introduce Lithuanian artist Eglė Rakauskaitė², who started her career exploring gender issues and working with her own body. One of her best known and most influential performances, entitled *In Fat*, was performed and filmed in 1998. The artist used her own body as a substance and submerged herself totally into warm fat and remained there for eight hours. The fat substance, getting cooler and cooler, became opaque and gradually hid the artist's body, making it invisible. The process was filmed with three cameras and presented on three TV monitors, which were turned from the spectator in such a way that you could not see the image itself, but only the reflection of the image mirrored from the glass surface. In this way the gaze of the spectator was interrupted and broken up, as if trying to evade the standardized types of representation.

The process of letting the fat get cool and opaque could be interpreted as an "active disappearance", as a refusal to pose for the consuming gaze of the Other. At the same time it is a refusal to present the body in terms of social or political agency. This body recalls the Body without Organs, described by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. Deleuze and Guattari introduce the notion of the Body without Organs as a counter-strategy to psychoanalytical interpretation of the body, which subjects the body to different forms of organization: fantasy, signification, subjectification. "Unlike psychoanalysis, /.../ the Body without Organs invokes a conception of the body that is disinvested of fantasy, images, projections, representations, a body without a psychical or secret interior, without internal cohesion and latent significance", points out Elisabeth Grosz (1994: 169). For Deleuze and Guattari, the Body without Organs means the possibility of the body "free" from any sexual, visual, political appropriations. "The Body without Organs is what remains when you take everything away. What you take away is precisely the fantasy, and significances and subjectifications as a whole" (Deleuze and Guattari 2004: 168). In this context, the impersonal body of Rakauskaitė's performance in a sense could be interpreted as the Body without Organs: it is no one's property, it has neither function nor signification, and is incapable of feeling any pleasure or invoking any fantasy.

Though it's not the subject of my article, I would like to ask if the notion of the Body without Organs has any significant political consequences. We can agree with Deleuze and Guattari that the Body without Organs is deprived of any sexual, social or political identity; the body becomes a place for inscribing and distributing different intensities, but the examples they give – the hypochondriac body, the paranoid body, the schizo body, the drugged body, the masochist body, as well as bodies full of gaiety, ecstasy and dance – do not suggest any socially significant solution. Speaking about Rakauskaitė's performance, we can assert that the perfor-

mance disrupts the play of sexual imagination, but at the same time refuses to interpret the body in terms of social or political agency.

Kristina Inčiūraitė, another Lithuanian female artist, regularly works with gender issues and provides one more interesting example of an "active disappearance". Her videos (*Rehearsal*, 2002, *Leisure*, 2003, *Spinsters*, 2003, *Order*, 2004, *Shutdown*, 2004, *Fall*, 2005, *Fire*, 2005) usually depict an empty stage which metonymically refers to the empty stage of representation. Why do these empty abandoned stages become a theme for visual narration? Is it an attempt to define the ideological changes in a public space? Why this empty stage has to be exposed, exhibited and in this way preserved? Of course, this empty stage is not totally empty: indirectly, it hints at other existing ideological scenes which never appear in the frame (such as mainstream popular culture). An empty stage not only points to certain areas of social isolation, but also talks about the crisis of representation itself. If we agree that mainstream popular culture is totally obscene or, as Hal Foster points out, it has no stage or scene for representation, here, on the contrary, we are being "pinned" to an empty stage, the content of which remains suspended.

What images are eliminated from the stage, which is also the stage of our imagination? A woman's voice from the backstage prompts us that it is precisely the woman's body that is not shown, though the heroines of all Inčiūraitė's videos are women talking about their femininity. This femininity always stands in conflict with the public space: the videos depict the coming-of-age teenagers in a children's foster home (*Spinsters*, 2003), sexuality framed by musical education (*Rehearsal*, 2002), the beautiful women of the vanishing town of Visaginas who have nowhere to go in their leisure time (*Leisure*, 2003), policewomen feeling awkward about their femininity (*Order*, 2004). All these topics, depicted in videos, are worthy of being discussed by Michel Foucault. But the most important thing in these videos is that although they speak about femininity, the female protagonists are invisible – we can only hear their voices in the backstage. This strategy of "double vanishing" is guiding all Inčiūraitė's videos: women become invisible both as social and political agents and as objects of scopophilic desire.

The refusal to participate in the scopophilic regime is the main theme in the videos *Bathroom* (2003) and *Lakes* (2004). Here the contrast between the film subject (woman as an erotic image in film industry) and the visual side of the film becomes almost comical. For example, the video *Bathroom* is shot in an old Austrian bathhouse and refers to the bathhouse as a place where bodies traditionally are naked. Indirectly the video makes a remark to the film *Ecstasy* (1933), known because of a young Austrian actress (Hedy Lamarr) who acted naked in a ten-minute swimming scene. The video consists of the monologues of female students from an Austrian Acting School, discussing the experience of acting, na-

² See: www.rakauskaitė.com

kedness and the erotic, which are accompanied by the still images of the bathhouse. In this way female subjects vanish from our sight and become invisible, but they are heard as subjects, having a political and social weight. Another video project, *Lakes* (which consists of two videos shown simultaneously) portrays the actress Vaiva Mainelytė who recollects the filming of one of the most famous Lithuanian erotic scenes. Her narration is visualized by a static image of a frozen lake (actually the scene took place in the same lake, but in the summer-time). In other words, these videos reveal that sexual fantasy fails without being backed up by standard images, without finding customary visual codes.

In other words, femininity, desire and fantasy in Inčiūraitė's videos are invested in social territories reminiscent of the idea of Deleuze and Guattari that desire and the social is one and the same thing (Deleuze, Guattari 1983: 28–29). Desire itself creates new social structures and is materialized through social activity. As is mentioned, all the videos depict the zones of social exception, which are marginalized by the capitalist ideology and order. Another important point in these videos is that these zones of exception are inhabited by femininity, though women, as we have seen, are consciously left beyond the frame. This double exception turns into absolute positivism embodied through the voice which fills the image with a material substance without imposing any ideological meaning. That is why the social antagonism depicted in the videos is not traumatic or repulsive. The invisible and vanishing femininity in some sense reintroduces into the frame the theme of social identity. Can we make a conclusion that women start acting as social subjects only when they become invisible as sexual subjects? Are gender identities and national / social identities related in such a way that they displace each other or take each other's place?

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IŠNYKSTANČIOS TAPATYBĖS ŠIUOLAIKINIAME LIETUVOS MENE

Santrauka

Straipsnyje analizuojama tautinės ir giminės (*gender*) tapatybės problema naudojantis Lietuvos šiuolaikinio meno pavyzdžiais. Keliamas klausimas, koku pagrindu galima kalbėti apie tautinę ar giminės tapatybę, kokia yra bet kurios tapatybės prigimtis. Remiamasi antiesencialistine prielaida, kad kiekviena tapatybė yra atsitiktinio ir santykinio pobūdžio. Kiekviena tapatybė funkcionuoja kaip tuščias signifikantas, kuris neturi pastovaus ir fiksuoto turinio, tačiau yra nuolat iš naujo apibrėžiamas simbolinėje plotmėje. Tapatybės sąvoką straipsnyje siūloma analizuoti pasitelkiant identifikacijos sampratą: identifikacija visuomet numato Kitą, kuriam subjektas vaidina vienokį ar kitokį vaidmenį. Todėl interpretuodami tautines ar giminės tapatybes turėtume klausti, kieno žvilgsniui subjektas pozuoja kurdamas tam tikrą savo vaizdinį. Slavojus Žižekas skiria išivaizduojamą identifikaciją, kai identifikuojamasi su vaizdiniu, kuriame patys sau patinkame, ir simbolinę identifikaciją, t. y. identifikaciją su vieta, iš kurios save stebime ir iš kurios žiūrėdami sau patinkame. Remiantis šiuo apibrėžimu, tautinė ar giminės tapatybė gali būti interpretuojamos kaip maskaradas, vaidinamas Kito žvilgsniui. Tai reiškia, jog ne tik tautinė, bet ir giminės tapatybė yra nuolat iš naujo apibrėžiamos kintančių galios režimų kontekste.

Raktažodžiai: tautinė tapatybė, giminės (*gender*) tapatybė, identifikacija, kitybė, Kito žvilgsnis