

Received: May 12, 2016  
Accepted: Jun 11, 2016  
Original scholarly paper  
UDC 7.038.531 Спацал А.  
821.163.6.09-93-32 Спацал А.  
141.72:7.01

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## Self-Portrait on The Kitchen Towel

**Abstract:** Philosopher, feminist theoretician and artist Alenka Spacal paints her self-portraits on kitchen towels (2003–2005). After first being placed in exhibition, eventually the hanging of these pieces morphed into performance, dubbed *Hanged Woman*, during which the artist hung her self-portraits on a rope with clothespins in front of an audience. Transgressing gender, religion and race, Spacal through these self-portraits situates herself in different subjective positions. During such a journey, the artist multiplies subjectivities, accomplishing theoretical and artistic figuration of *nomadic subject*, which, according to Rosi Braidotti constitutes by changing subject positions and thus overcoming dominant phallogocentric rationality. In this case it occurs through artistic practice and irony. The second portion of this paper is devoted to the children's picture book *Rainbow Masquerade*, also written and illustrated by Spacal, who abandons the essentialist dual normativity of sex and gender in order to represent plurality of the two categories in the fantastic world of a wood and its inhabitants.

**Keywords:** Alenka Spacal, self-portraits, nomadic subject, sex, gender, children literature

“Avtoportret se je skozi zgodovino pri prevpraševanju in vzpostavljanju lastnih subjektivnih pozicij izkazal kot najprimernejša in najdostopnejša umetniška oblika. Izpostavitev sebe kot avtonomnega subjekta je bila na umetniških delih za ženske še posebej pomembna v obdobjih, ko jim likovne umetnosti večinoma niso bile dostopne kot profesionalne dejavnosti.”

“Throughout history, the self-portrait turned out to be the most adequate and the most available artistic form for questioning and establishing the subject positions. Particularly important it was for women to establish themselves as autonomous subjects, especially in the periods when painting was not available for them as a professional business.”

Alenka Spacal, “Avtoportretni motiv umetnice s knjogo v roki”,  
*Ars&Humanitas, Študije*, 2010.

Visual feminist art as a practice as well as the theoretical expression of Spacal represent a finely-woven web of her self-portraits, academic papers and the picture book for children *Rainbow Masquerade (Mavrična maškarada)*, created as the result of artistic, theoretical and pedagogical work. Spacal was born in Ljubljana in 1975; she studied philosophy and received her Ph.D. in sociology in the field of arts, from the feminist perspective, researching women painters, their self-representation and social contexts and the practice of excluding women artists from the canon. Parallel to the feminist theoretical research of representation and self-representation of women's bodies, Spacal devoted herself to painting.

In the period between 2002 and 2005, Spacal painted self-portraits on kitchen towels that questioned her own subject positions. These works of art are undoubtedly related to theoretical texts in which the author was dealing with female painters, about whom, due to the dominant patriarchal canon, we have little information. These female painters have appeared since the Renaissance and exactly through self-representation have endeavored to achieve their own subjectivity. Writing herself into the existing researched tradition, Spacal painted a series of self-portraits in which one of the most powerful threads in the transformation and subjective positioning might be singled out as the transgression of gender and sexuality, represented in changes of body posture, outfit and haircut. (A particularly interesting example can be found in the painting with the sequence of long hair to short hair to shaved head, where the mouth of the long-haired self-portrait is covered by the short-haired one. The short-haired one is 'vomited out,' as arrived as the self-expression of the long-haired woman, becoming her self-expressed replacement.) Certainly, this is only one level of the subject questioning and obtaining a certain position, but before I turn to more detailed interpretations, it is necessary to describe at least some of the self-portraits. From the first one Spacal looks at us fearfully, while the emphasized expressiveness of the other is located in the eyes that seem as if wishing to talk. In one of the self-portraits she depicts herself with ropes bridling her head, covering her mouth, choking her neck and preventing her from speaking; in the next self-portrait she cries a river (similar to one in which she cries blood), while elsewhere she shouts loudly and resolutely, in contrast to the one in which she appears serene and relaxed, although through the broken glass of one side of her spectacles. In one of the self-portraits Spacal questions her own ambivalent, unfixed and unstable position expressed through a double self-portrait – in one we see from the profile, but very clearly (it is the one in which a woman is depicted so that we see only a part of her face, while the other is behind, looking at us frontally, trying to see us and, more importantly, to address us. This active character is visible only partly, as it is hidden by the first one. The emphasized ambivalence expressed also in said self-portrait is similar to that in which the painter questions her own sexuality and gender; we also see the self-portraits of a Muslim, and of an African woman that emphasize empathy, adopting the experience of Otherness in a religious and racial sense.

The first exhibition of *Self-Portraits* was held in Lund, Sweden in 2003 at the Fifth European Feminist Research Conference titled *Gender and Power in New Europe*. There,

Spacal hung her kitchen towel self-portraits before the opening of exhibition.<sup>1</sup> Three years later in Dubrovnik, at the tenth anniversary celebration of the *Seminar of Women's Infoteka*, the exhibition developed into the performance wherein Spacal hung her self-portraits along a clothesline in front of the audience, giving the new title to the new format: *Hanged Woman (Obješjenjakinja)*.<sup>2</sup> Using a multilayered parodic game, first through the choice of kitchen towels as canvases for the oil self-portraits, but also through the act of inserting private space into a public one, the author subversively transformed a passive woman subject into an active one. Through the transformations in self-representation she was holding and changing multiple subject positions, challenging thus the stereotypes about *the Other*.<sup>3</sup> Appropriating norm and stereotypes, Spacal uses them for new positioning and continuous redefinition of the self, which fits into the figurative techniques of *nomadic subject* as defined by Braidotti, achievable through taking multiple subject positions. As for the figuration of *nomadic subject*, it is accomplished through the questioning of *difference*, through the figure *as if*, which means through holding and shifting different subject positions, not through the physical journey, but rather through the nomadism that happens exactly on the plane of subjectivity.<sup>4</sup> It is important to emphasize that this does not happen merely on the level of thinking, having rather materialized character of “situated, embedded and embodied positions.”<sup>5</sup> One very important concept that Braidotti borrows from bell hooks<sup>6</sup> is *yearnings* with the emphasized meaning of *political empathy*,<sup>7</sup> which is also recognizable in the work of Spacal in the mentioned examples of different changeable elements of self-representation (race, religion, gender and sexuality) and experiences (of repression, fear, sorrow, empathy, the need for communication and self-realization, of conquering one's own expression and own voice).

The crucial position of Braidotti is that rationality, which is an integral part of the scientific discourse constructed in the patriarchal tradition (phallogocentrism), diverges from the nomadic style that appears freely through the different ways of motion and expression of thoughts, mainly through arts and parody, which are both recognizable in Spacal's self-portraits. Exactly by painting these self-portraits, Spacal made nomadic moves, dismissing the singular and central position of “I” which Braidotti defines as “humble experience” which does not relativize the *Others*, but rather enables establishing an ethical connection with them.<sup>8</sup> Hanging the kitchen towels (self-portraits)

<sup>1</sup> The exhibition was repeated as a part of collective exhibitions and independently in Ljubljana (in 2004 during the female studies summer school *NOISE*, and 2005 as part of the female festival *Rdeče zore*), in Belgrade (in 2005 during the queer festival *Susreti*) and in Zagreb (in 2005 during the conference *Transgressing gender – two is not enough for gender (e)quality*).

<sup>2</sup> Two more performances under the same title were held in 2007, in Vienna during the *Lady Fest* and at Ljubljana's *Monokl* club.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Theory*, New York, Columbia University Press 2011, 33.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 169.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 14.

<sup>6</sup> bell hooks is a pen name of Gloria Jean Watkins, American author, feminist, and social activist.

<sup>7</sup> Rozi Braidotti, “Nomadski subjekt, Uvod: Putem nomadizma”, *ProFemina*, 40–41, 2005/2006, 168.

<sup>8</sup> Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Theory*, op. cit., 52.

points to another aspect of the theory Braidotti, who exactly in the repetitive works that most women do automatically in their households, recognizes the space of women's creativity and freedom. "At the times like that, the mind is in transit between different things, floating around, not quite focused and yet perfectly alive: this is a nomadic state of discontinuous presence. [...] if the noncentrality of 'I' is central to postmodernism, women have been postmodern since beginning of the time!"<sup>9</sup> When Braidotti makes subversion of *difference* that which stands in the center of phallogocentric thought, she uses it in a positive way in order to free it from historical layers in which *difference* was used for marking *the Other*, which is always constructed as less valuable and positioned on the devaluated side of the binary pair, or as Braidotti says, the one who is "slightly more mortal than the first-class subjects"<sup>10</sup>. Similarly, Spacal mobilizes her own subjective *Othernesses* through the ironic positioning of the private space into the public (or the second-class sphere into the first), establishing *difference* as positive and active. Social and inner subjectivities encounter and appear. In this way Foucauldian *potestas*, meaning restrictive power that is dominant and oppressive, moves back in front of the affirmative, empowering power of *potentiae*, which brings freedom and stands up for itself and *the Other*.<sup>11</sup> Apart from playing with *difference*, Spacal, in accordance with the aforementioned theory of Braidotti, actually makes an effort to overcome binaries by taking multiple situated positions of the *nomadic subject* and by occupying the spaces that flow and relate somewhere in between.<sup>12</sup> These are the areas where Spacal's self-portraits create "a living map, a transformative account of the self"<sup>13</sup>.

The parodic juxtaposition of the private and public sphere and the act of hanging the towels transform the object of the *kitchen towel* into the subject, as an example of using laughter for affirmation, as problematized by Hélène Cixous.<sup>14</sup> Spacal directs a humorous barb directly at the norm, at accepted stereotypes and constructed hierarchy. She uses irony to distort "the truth" and "breaks up the truth with 'laughter'"<sup>15</sup>.

Another parodic element is recognizable in the title of the performance, "Hanged Woman". Namely, in ancient myths, the only exit from difficult, impossible situations and the only rebellion and aggression allowed to women was self-directed. This is illustrated in literary and mythic tradition, in accounts of women seeking – and finding – an escape via suicide, specifically by hanging themselves. In this context, the performance *Hanged Woman* is an example of another subversive intervention, in which a woman hangs herself not as a means of disappearance, but self expression and to come into

<sup>9</sup> Rosi Braidotti, "Feminism and Modernity", *Free Inquiry*, Vol. 15, Issue 2, Spring 1995, accessed on <https://www.questia.com/read/1G1-16871561/feminism-and-modernity>, 9. 3. 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem

<sup>11</sup> Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Theory*, op. cit., 268.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>14</sup> Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa", <http://lavachequil.typepad.com/files/cixous-read.pdf>, ac. 30 May 2016. Elen Siksu, "Smeh meduze", *Pro Femina: časopis za žensku književnost i kulturu*, 43–45, 2006, 67–81.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 77.

being. This intervention might be interpreted as the revision of myth, as theorized by Alicia Suskin Ostriker in the book *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America*. Ostriker emphasizes that a change of cultural values requires a myth revision, as myths always express and reflect dominant social norms. "Myths are the sanctuaries of language where our meanings for 'male' and 'female' are stored; to rewrite them from a female point of view is to discover new possibilities for meaning."<sup>16</sup>

The kitchen towels upon which Spacal's self-portraits are painted possess a characteristic crucial for women: that of flight. The towels fly and wave in the space, distorting the dominant order, exactly as Hélène Cixous writes, comparing women and the robber birds who conquer the space, rearrange the furniture and, more importantly, change the order of things. Thus, these self-portraits presented in public space are "dislocating things and values".<sup>17</sup>

### **Rainbow Masquerade**

Nomadic style is characteristic of the mixture of styles in writing. Discussing this, Braidotti emphasizes the importance of freedom in academic discourse by freely crossing disciplines and combining academic style with the poetical and lyrical. In her picture book *Rainbow Masquerade*, Spacal subtly weaves feminist theory into fiction for children, this time not directly combining discourses simultaneously, but rather going step by step – firstly dealing with the issues of sex and gender from a theoretical perspective, and only afterwards integrating it and transforming it into children's book, through a subtle rethinking of this complex issue out of the theoretical domain, and making it accessible to children, by de-essentializing the binary male-female normative. This venture is important also because the dominant attitude towards sex and gender accept only male-female dichotomy, while many persons still in childhood face the feeling of inadequacy and impossibility to fit into the prescribed norms.

The concepts of sex and gender are complex, being treated differently in feminist and queer theory. The initial impulse for the differentiation of the two was given by representatives of the Second wave feminism pointing out that the gender is socially constructed category, while sex is 'natural'.<sup>18</sup> Judith Butler went further, developing the idea that sex is also socially constructed, that "sex is always already gender" accomplished and naturalized through cultural practices.<sup>19</sup> Both of these categories are *always already* determined and children are born either as girls or boys. On the other hand, medicine

<sup>16</sup> Alicia Suskin Ostriker, *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry*, Boston. Beacon Press 1986, 11, cf. Gloria Naylor, *Strategy and Technique: Magic and Myth*, Newark, University of Delaware Press 2001, 97.

<sup>17</sup> Hélène Cixous, op. cit., 16.

<sup>18</sup> See more in: Aleksa Milanović, *Reprezentacije transrodnih identiteta*, Beograd, FMK–rion Art, 2015, 17, 18. Cf. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity*, New York, Routledge 1990.

<sup>19</sup> Ibidem.

encounters cases that do not fit into the standard norms, recognizing more variations,<sup>20</sup> however, and this is crucial, defining them as anomalies and not as a fact. The existence of clinical programs for gender change and teaching children “adequate” gender behavior, actually confirms idea of male and female gender as the only two that exist.<sup>21</sup>

Concerning the English term *gender*, it does not have the adequate translation in the Slovenian language, being translated usually as *socijalni pol* (*social sex*). Regardless, the term *sex* that is used in this picture book sometimes has biological, sometimes social connotations, but for the readers of the book that is not really important.<sup>22</sup> Namely, what the theory of gender describes as the category that is socially constructed is not possible to interpret theoretically in the book, simply because stylistically and discursively it does not fit there. The author has resolved this successfully exactly in the sphere of fantasy in which everything and nothing is truth. This picture book, describing the richness of sex and gender opens the perspective making it clear how the binary norm is narrow and limiting. In this sense, the literary work aimed at the youngest readers might be understood as activist and directed against dominant ideological patterns. In a practical and pedagogic sense, the book is important for the young people who experience difficulty fitting into the offered heteronormative, which is made even more difficult by the judgments, discrimination and the characterization of anomaly that refers to any variation. Because, as the rabbit in the book says: “the sex (and gender) should not provoke fear. The sex (and gender) are here to play with.” Without any intention of decreasing the importance of gender and queer theory that are certainly crucial for its appearance, *Rainbow Masquerade* has the dimension that most of theories lack. Namely, with a playfulness and imagination characteristic of fiction, the author uses the style and text (written and visual) to represent gender and sexual freedom and invention, exactly because it was not necessary to make any classifications and conceptualization inevitable in theoretical discourse.

In *Rainbow Maquerade* Spacal visualizes the animal world on a holiday in a chesnut wood, preparing for the masquerade during which they will dress up either in the other, or in their own gender, while some of them will mask in several genders at the same time. At the very beginning, the squirrel invites the turtle Žel (želva Žel), who, hearing what kind of masquerade it is, realizes that he/she does not know which gender is he/she, and starting to think about it for the first time, comes to the conclusion that it does not matter at all. What the turtle knows is that he/she is a *nomad*, always at home within his/her own armor, and multiple possible subjectivities, in accordance to Braidotti’s previously-mentioned theory. The turtle soon meets the snail, who discovers that he/she has two sexes – sometimes being female, sometimes male and sometimes both simultaneously. Since

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<sup>20</sup> The gender variability that exceeds male/female dichotomy exists in some societies that recognize three, four or even five genders. Janice M. Irvine, *Disorders of Desire: Sex and Gender in Modern American Sexology*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press 1990, 267. After all, Greek mythology gave Hermaphroditus.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 237.

<sup>22</sup> This is the reason why I had to make choice how to translate the term *spol*, opting sometimes for sex, or for gender, or sometimes using both terms as translation.

the change of sex is easy for the snail, he/she does not want to think too much in advance which kind of masque he/she would wear, rather enjoying the freedom of choice. And exactly through the dressing for the masquerade Spacal points to the important characteristic of gender theorize by Judith Butler in the book *Undoing Gender*, claiming that in spite of the fact that gender is activity that comes into being continuously, it does not mean that it happens automatically or mechanically. It is rather connected to establishing relations with others (that are either real or imagined).<sup>23</sup> In that sense, the protagonists of this book are different animals preparing for the masquerade, either to dress up in their own, or in the other sex or in several sexes at the same time, and exactly this is the way in which the author points out that sex and gender identities are not fixed, nor given once for all, but rather being changeable, depending on invention and not fitting into binary male-female normative. They “should be approached playfully”<sup>24</sup>.

## Conclusion

Theoretical interpretation of two art works by Spacal self-portraits on the kitchen towels in the performance *Hanged Woman*, and the picture book *Rainbow Masquerade* offers numerous relations to feminist and queer theory, some of which I mentioned briefly respecting the scope of this paper. Playfulness, flying, remaking of order and questioning values are equal characteristics of the self-portraits, as well as the book, while irony and parody, as an important component of self-portraits and nomadic style, do not find their place in the children’s book. The author writes about sex and gender abandoning essentialist ideas, using imagination freely and without obvious referent interventions regarding the norm, which the youngest readers, open for learning, have not yet accepted totally. This picture book is the example how feminist and queer theories continue their existence beyond theory, which is the crucial step for intervention in everyday life.



<sup>23</sup> Judith Buttlar, *Undoing Gender*, New York, Routledge, 2004, 1.

<sup>24</sup> Alenka Spacal, *Mavrična maškarada*, Ljubljana, Škuc (Zbirka Lambada), 2013, 14.