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Inter/Trans-Disciplinarity as a Platform for Seeking Universal Common Ground: From Speculation to Pragmatism Through Kristina Pulejkova's *Wedding Route* Art Project

Abstract: This paper aims to present one specific case study of the inter/trans-disciplinarity and inter/trans-mediality in Macedonian contemporary art – a project of the young Macedonian artist Kristina Pulejkova. The project, titled *Wedding Route*, is an immersive installation that deals with the overlapping of knowledge gained from the natural sciences and arts, while also questioning politics, ecology, technology.

Wedding Route deals with the life cycle and migration of the critically endangered European eel. No matter where they live, once sexually mature, they turn into a silvery color and make their final arduous journey back to Sargasso Sea, driven by their instinct. Lake Ohrid (the largest in Macedonia) is currently being artificially populated with eels, as this animal has been unable to migrate into the lake's waters since 1962 when the first hydroelectric dam was built. Globally, the European eel population faces rapid declination, and its story is very much that of man-made borders, overfishing and death caused by habitat decline and climate change, hence preventing its millions of years old migration back to the Sargasso Sea.

Through an inter and trans-disciplinary approach that combines art, science, and technology, working with moving pictures, sound, and installation, Pulejkova aims to build subjective narratives relying on scientific data and principles. The project and its outcome is a pure example of speculative pragmatism, since through theoretical exploration and artistic visual simulation of the location and the appearance of the act of eel spawning (since scientists have so far only speculated on the occurrence of this mysterious event) she offers a pragmatic discussion on ecology, migration, and politics in general.

Keywords: inter/trans-disciplinarity; trans-mediality; Kristina Pulejkova; politics; ecology; technology; Macedonian contemporary art; science; speculative pragmatism.

Instead of introduction (local projection)

When it comes to new media art in Macedonia, examples of applying the latest technologies are somewhat rare, and even less, the scene is involved in the field of inter and trans-disciplinary art with other areas. One of the shining examples of these cutting-edge visual expressions in art in Macedonia is the example of the young artist Kristina Pulejkova, who is based in London, where she lives, works, researches, and studies. She graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, Department of Painting and Animation, and then received her master's degree in Art and Technology from St. Martin's University in London. Her own training defined Pulejkova's approach in which nothing in the fine arts can be represented solely through the form of art, without exploring and relying on other specific scientific disciplines that would create an unmistakable visual-conceptual amalgam, which is multilayered and not only trans-medial and transdisciplinary, but it also analyses current issues in the domain of politics, ecology and technology.

In that context, we may denote to Pulejkova and her visual approach, the statement made by the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead that "Philosophy can exclude nothing"¹, or by analogy – the same matter embodied in Pulejkova's visual researches and the artistic approach, *artistic research can exclude nothing*.

Wedding Route

The project is titled *Wedding Route* and represents a complex multimedia installation that includes video footage recorded in a studio with actors, based on a previous script written by Pulejkova and choreographed by the project collaborator Georgia Tegou, designed on water screens; holographic projection and video in 360 degree virtual reality.

The concept around which the project narrative is defined and shaped is the story of the European eel, listed as an endangered species, and parallel to the European eel, Pulejkova locally includes the Ohrid eel, which naturally counts among the European, but because the migration route has been officially obstructed, it is now artificially reproduced. The eel is a very specific species that passes through three life stages maturing from a small translucent 'glass' to an adult yellow and sexually mature silver-clad entity.

It instinctively migrates to the Sargasso Sea, where the act of reproduction occurs, which is at the same time the last chain of the journey of its existence; death follows, and the little ones, carrying the code of origin and "the intelligence and knowledge" of its predecessors, go back the way their parents had traveled. The miraculous journey given by nature that speaks in a specific way of migration in general, seen through a human perspective, addresses the migrant's feelings, dilemmas, questions, background, nostalgia, self-identification. The Ohrid eel should have been on the

¹ Alfred North Whitehead, *Modes of Thought* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1966), 2.

same pathfinding its own way of reproduction and survival, but unfortunately, back in 1962, a dam was built on the eels' route heading to the Republic of Albania, and today five additional dams are situated on that same route. Hence, the natural eels' reproductive system was forcibly halted (numerous are the horrible recordings of eels wholeheartedly trying not to succumb to the instinct, hence being minced by the turbines of the hydropower plants) and ever since, Lake Ohrid has been spawning eels artificially. This discourse poses a serious question of human impact on environmental disasters on the one hand, and the political share, perspectives, and platforms on the other. It opens the discourses of blocking or opening borders to different types of nationalities, to frequent human migrations throughout the past along the Albania-Macedonia route, of the past fleeing of Albanian population trying to escape the Enver Hoxha regime. On the other hand, it also speaks to the more recent, tragic evacuations of Syrian refugees seeking their way to a brighter future for themselves and their children (similar to the eels themselves).

Visualization

Pulejkova organizes this narrative or concept visually into moving pictures; in the studio, she shoots dancers performing the so-called *Wedding Route*² on behalf of the eels. Two videos of three dancers (each representing an eel in their respective ages: a child, a girl, and a mature girl), perform the magical dance, one representing the eels of London's River Thames, the other the Ohrid Eel. The footage is post-production animated and computer-aided with water effects and wondrous aquatic realms. In these videos, the sound design is by Andy Coaton, and text is added and read both in English and Macedonian – a dialogue of a kind between the two eels, sharing experiences on their different journeys.

The presentation of videos on water screens – “surfaces” created from tightly placed compressed jets of water that create a distinct shimmering, glass surface – emanates the effect of projecting a transparent, holographic image or projection that may be viewed from both perspectives (front and back). The eels' conversation, in Macedonian and English, accented and amplified by the specific echo of the Chifte Hammam building, provides a somnolent, trance state, which brings the recipient to another sensory level, in which they are irritated and “aggressively” introduced into a different frequency of sensibility, privacy, self-echo and empathizing with the other.

On the other hand, the video presented through the set of 360-degree virtual reality enables the recipient to become an active participant, to enter the magical depths of the sea, to become important co-participant in the speculative process of thinking about the miraculous story of the eel in general, and the tragic story of the Ohrid eel respectively. It initiates debate on the awareness of the catastrophic condition and endangerment of the European eel in general. It criticizes the notion of

² The title of the reproductive process of the eels, obtained by the hydro-biologists of the Institute in Ohrid.

the “political superiority“ of humans over the fate of the Ohrid eel locally. This project advises on the creation of a platform to prevent ecologic disasters, to impact climate change, to instigate bilateral talks to discuss this burning issue, and hence the dams would be demolished, and the numerous absurdist conditions in the eco-system would be terminated, etc.

The holographic projection of the eel based on an emotional textual speech extract from one of the eel species (which treats that last-breath emotional element in which the eel watches its unborn children return on its way, symbolically and literally closing a life cycle) is the only visual projection of a real eel (in appearance and form), the author ultimately decided to include in this small excerpt directly the eel itself, which in the rest of the project is delivered in human form and implicitly.

Conceptual discursivity

Wedding Route speaks of the search for common ground, of the human aspiration to reach an idyllic state of unity, of understanding, of a world without obstacles and barriers, of a world of compromises and solutions to problems and situations. With the visual language, Pulejkova projects the Macedonian perspective and aspiration to the European future – much like that of our eel, so that the individual may be accomplished at the level of education, work, or pursuit of a better life, by never forgetting his/her origin, roots, or affiliation. She herself, as a migrant, has experienced the advantages and disadvantages of being far from her native country. Pulejkova gathers science and knowledge experiences,³ refines those through recent technologies, making the knowledge more accessible and more transparent, thereby directly stimulating deeper discourses on socio-political conditions, ecology, and other key issues of contemporary society.

An important and indisputable fact is the consideration of the *Wedding Route* as a particular case of activist philosophy that philosopher Brian Massumi treats as a kind of speculative pragmatism, i.e., the relation of art with politics, that is, aesthetics and politics.

On the other hand, as a key aspect, the connection of cultural theory with ecology should be emphasized, which is treated as an important element in the so-called neo-Whitehead wave in philosophy (of which Massumi is an undeniable part). Massumi wrote: “Ultimately, the thinking of speculative pragmatism that is activist philosophy, belongs to nature. Its aesthetic-politics compose a nature philosophy. The occurrent arts in which it exhibits itself are politics of nature.”⁴ This undeniable part of politics, that is, ecology, is a very specific focus in Pulejkova’s project, a parable that initiates a discussion platform that needs to be constantly online, current and active.

³ Pulejkova gathers all information from research centres, that is, from the Zoological Society of London, as well as from the Hydrobiology Institute of Ohrid.

⁴ Adrian J Ivakhiv, “Whitehead’s return, ecology’s boon,” *UVM Blogs* (April 29, 2012), <https://blog.uvm.edu/aivakhiv/2012/04/29/whiteheads-return-ecologys-boon/>, acc. on January 4, 2020.

Another aspect of the analogy of our visual instance of Pulejkova's *Wedding Route* in the context of Brian Massumi's reflections, highlighted in his book *Semblance and Event* is "the experiences of inhumane forms of life and inanimate matter itself."⁵

Massumi posed this question first in his "Autonomy of Effect", where he draws on Simondon and Deleuze to make a distinction between human and the inhumane, not in terms of "presence or absence" of consciousness or thinking, but in terms of their "directness". In "Semblance and Event", he relies more on Whitehead to discover the issue of inhumane perception and, implicitly again, on Emerson's concept of "experiences", especially that of inhumane forms of life. To answer the question of inhumane perception, Massumi follows Whitehead's discussion of the electron as "the emergence of experience." And, though he only occasionally refers to this concern in the book, citing his reader to the forthcoming essay for further clarification, the introduction closes with constant meditation on the relations between human, biological, and physical perceptions.

As elsewhere in his work, Massumi rejects any difficult and rapid differences between humans, biologically inhumane, and physical matters. He does so not to equate these various "occurrences of experience" but as a means of aligning their continuity with the uniqueness of the "human form of life".⁶ Here, in the context of Pulejkova's story, people's experiences and influences intertwine, the natural life process of reproducing the lower animal forms – the eels and the possible presence of physical forces – the magnetism that conditions the instinctive reproduction of the eels right in the heart of the Sargasso.

***Wedding Route* and the implications of the philosophical thought/ correlations with speculative pragmatism and its protagonists**

Interesting is the aspect of pragmatism, speculation, empiricism or their coinage of speculative pragmatism, as specific philosophical directions that I have tried to imply in Pulejkova's project since the project itself treats both critical thinking, science and politics, but also the creation of possible experiential perspectives, i.e. things that both Whitehead and James, Deleuze, Massumi and many others were referring to, from a different, more thoughtful, philosophical perspective. In order to approximate their philosophical thinking and to visualize them through the given project, I went through an analysis of their key insights. *Wedding Route* is not an irrational, metaphysical context, it is proven in practice, there are scientific insights of the path and manner of eel spawning, and those have been confirmed and researched, except for a small but crucial enigma, which is still unknown to scientists and biologists, and that is the place where the reproduction act occurs and what it looks like. Hence, all the experiences that emerged at the level of assumption about the act and the process

⁵ Brian Massumi, *Semblance and Event* (Cambridge, London: MIT Press, 2011), 25.

⁶ Richard Grusin, "Reading *Semblance and Event*," *Postmodern Culture. Journal of interdisciplinary thought on contemporary cultures* 21, 3 (January 2011), doi: 10.1353/pmc.2011.0018.

itself, i.e., additional unverified explanation of what is already established, are generic sequences of speculation, which is invariably vital in creating the complete picture of the essence and truth of things. However imaginative it is, it is both real and genuine, that is, it exists, however immaterial it is, it does occur, and new eel individuals return back from the places where their parents started off.

We must therefore not equate Whitehead's plea ("philosophy can exclude nothing") with formalist sacralization, which identifies speculation as purely formal and abstract decision-making, which governs an important part of philosophy today. The proposal has no descriptive purpose, much less normative, but falls under what Whitehead calls "emotion-driven" and a way of creating opportunities. Hence Pulejkova visually offers sensitivity and new possibilities.

Let us go back to Whitehead's encouragement, to the impossibility of exclusion, and if he cited this view as a condition and determining a possible trajectory of speculative thinking, it is because there may be new dangers or temptations affecting philosophy, which he wants to resist. In short, this danger would be expressed as an indecisive taste for fake problems, for dramatic alternatives, for some kind of lazy reflections, or nonsense that arise "naturally" in any situation: faith or truth, experience or representation, facts or values, subjective or objective, etc. In regard to all of these alternatives, as well as any false problem, questions need to be asked of pragmatic nature: what may their purpose be? What are their effects? What is it about this occasion that we are trying to disqualify?⁷ Implicit in our visual case – are more alternatives more likely to reveal the truth about the place and the way the eels are spawning? Is it possible that with more alternatives, the genuine one is found to solve the problem of environmental pollution and changes and extinctions of whole ecosystems? By setting up more alternatives, can a solution to the problem of artificial spawning in Lake Ohrid be found and pave the way for the natural *Wedding Route* of these geographical entities?

What Whitehead says about this is: "Philosophy cannot neglect the multifariousness of the world – the fairies dance, and Christ is nailed to the cross."⁸ Hence, speculative reflection invites us to research the modes of existence within our own setting, in our own successful mode, in our immanent demands. In the context of the various modes of existence (or alternatives), it is interesting to quote Étienne Souriau, who says: "At present, we must identify and study those different planes, those different modes of existence, without which there would be no existence at all – no more than there would be pure Art without statues, pictures, symphonies, and poems. For art is all the arts. And the existence of each of the modes of existence. Each mode is an art of existing unto itself."⁹

Nevertheless, the question asked here is, what is the boundary by which we should take all alternatives without limitations? Is speculative thinking doomed to

⁷ Didier Bebaise and Isabelle Stengers, "L'insistance des possibles. Pour un pragmatisme spéculatif," *Multitudes* 65 (2016): 14.

⁸ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality. An Essay in Cosmology* (New York, NY: Macmillan Publishing Inc., 1929), 338.

⁹ Étienne Souriau, *The Different Modes of Existence*. (Univocal Publishing, 2015), 131.

be a kind of neutral set of modes of existence that make our experience? This is surely one of the temptations to be found in a considerable part of modern speculative thinking. It is confirmed that experience is one which must create limitation. This position views Whitehead's speculative thinking as a continuation of what William James called "radical empiricism": "To be radical, empiricism must not admit in its constructions any element that is not directly experienced, nor exclude from them any element that is directly experienced."¹⁰ When we talk about experiences seen through Pulejkova's *Wedding Route* prism, can we also talk about the decanting stories of human migration? Or, in other words, can Pulejkova, being a migrant herself, have the "experiential" or lived-in right to set up discourses and elaborate various migration alternatives to other animal species? Do close collaborations with scientific institutions and direct insights of scientific assumptions make it sufficiently pragmatic in their speculative abilities to share possible alternatives and visual perceptions?

In "Undigesting Deleuze" Brian Massumi says:

The image of thought at issue here is an odd bird: speculative pragmatism. Speculative pragmatism must actively affirm – accompany – the potential of what it thinks. The philosopher cannot take a seat of judgment outside or above. She must take the plunge. She must mutually include her own thought/activity in the process at issue. This provides a good candidate for the missing qualifier: the Deleuze speculative-pragmatic wave... For speculative pragmatism, anything potentially goes. But, precisely because of that, every little thing matters – more than we can ever know in advance. Everything matters; but also, everything matters on, following the singular trail of potential's unfolding.¹¹

Massumi characterized his work as "activist philosophy" (a philosophy for which the ultimate concept is an activity, not substance); "speculative pragmatism" (a philosophy for which current practice holds as much potential in future potential as existing functions and well-known public utility services); "ontogenetic" as opposed to ontology (a philosophy for which becoming is primary in relation to being); and "reckless materialism" (a philosophy that attributes abstract dimensions to the reality of body and matter).

Considering the narrowest insights, discourses, oppositions, opposites that have appeared on the trail of the philosophical reasoning and the interpretation of ideas most closely tied to pragmatic and speculative philosophy, it may be concluded that Pulejkova's *Wedding Route*, which is in pursuit of alternative experiential truths or importance, is a speculative pragmatism as such, as in her project, "everything matters" and everything is taken into account. Trans-mediality and trans-disciplinarity only contribute to a greater emphasis on the visual-conceptual impact that this project anticipates and emanates before the public.

¹⁰ William James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1976), 22.

¹¹ Brian Massumi, "Undigesting Deleuze," *Los Angeles Review of Books* (November 8, 2015), <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/undigesting-deleuze/>, acc. January 4, 2020.

Instead of conclusion

The phenomenon of eel migration and the saga of the Ohrid eel is also covered in other artistic media, such as, for instance, in Luan Starova's novel *The Route of the Eel*, which is also taken as a key metaphor in the narrative of human exterminations and migration and the struggles of the populations of Macedonia and Albania, both in the past and in the ongoing politics of present times, viewed through varied perspectives and discourses. Hence, the eel-human analogy is an inspiring parable of contemporary migrations and transversals of the quest for existence.

And, instead of a conclusion, for Pulejkova's *Wedding Route*, I would apostrophize the aspect of divergence and opponency of the human cognition and consciousness, as opposed to the instinct of the animal world, presented through the story of the eel. This duality gives exclusivity to the narrative of the latter, as the tendency to alter innate cognition and the natural process is a conscious attempt by the former to be complicit in natural disasters and extinction of species. In a portable sense, this may be put into a different connotation, that is, to be equated with the relation of the larger and more developed states and peoples, as opposed to the smaller and more dependent societies and their citizens, instinctively eager for the freedom of thought and utopian, borderless spaces.



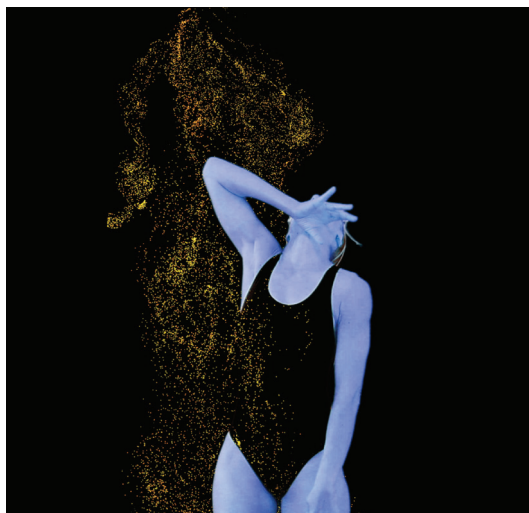
A Calling, Deeply, 360° piece, 2019

A film by Kristina Pulejkova; Choreography: Georgia Tegou; Cinematography: Shivani Hassard; Music and Sound Design: Glen Johnson; Animation and Postproduction: Kristina Pulejkova; Camera Assistant: Sam Weston. *A Calling, Deeply* is made with support by FLAMIN, Arts Council England and Fenton Arts Trust. Photo credits: Kristina Pulejkova



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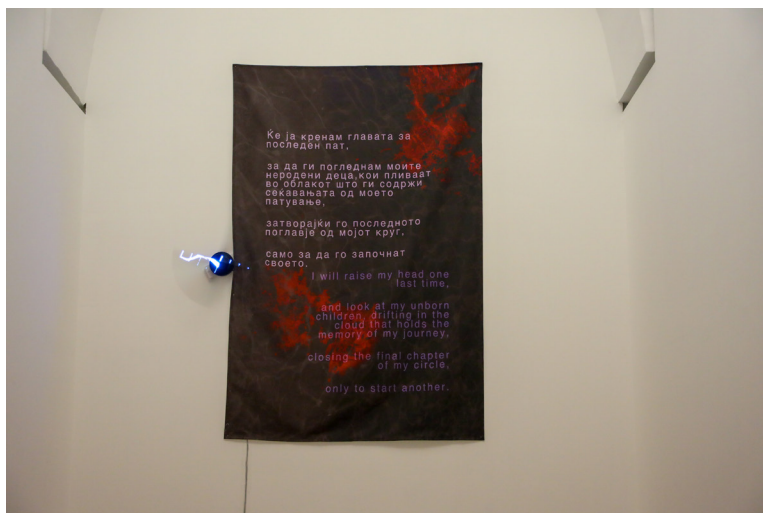
Do You Think About Home?, Water Screen Installation, 2019

Installation by Kristina Pulejkova; Choreography: Georgia Tegou; Cinematography: Kristina Pulejkova; Animation and Post-production: Kristina Pulejkova; Music and Sound Design: Glen Johnson; Water Screens and Projection Mapping Production: Nikola Kumev; Voice recording: Ivan Trajchev. Photo credits: Kristina Pulejkova



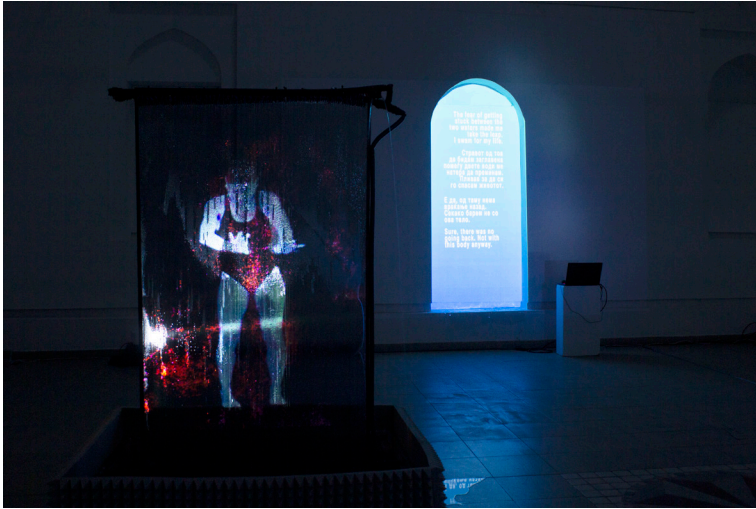
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I Will Raise My Head One Last Time,

Installation, digital print on canvas and holographic projection, 2019. Photo credits: Denis Jakdži



Do You Think About Home?, Water Screen Installation, 2019

Installation by Kristina Pulejkova; Choreography: Georgia Tegou; Cinematography: Kristina Pulejkova; Animation and Postproduction: Kristina Pulejkova; Music and Sound Design: Glen Johnson; Water Screens and Projection Mapping Production: Nikola Kumev; Voice recording: Ivan Trajchev.
Photo credits: Kristina Pulejkova

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