Blue

By Anamarija Batista

The sun no longer burned as of five in the afternoon. In the 1980s. There was no need to fear getting a sunburn. On the contrary. The gentle sunrays caressed the body in an enjoyable way. This part of the world moved gently into the evening.

The bench in front of the post office that the building shares with the school and the travel agency was framed by two large cypress trees. The bench was green, so were the cypresses. The bench was used when we were waiting for the tourists to arrive. Protected from the blaze of the sun, we looked at the kiosk opposite, around which the sun circled. We kept awake by reading graphic novels.

You could hide from the sun, but you couldn't escape it.

The work *From Somewhere in the Mediterranean* (2020) by Irena Eden & Stijn Lernout directs its focus, as the title suggests, at a geographic space that is held together and at the same time divided by the sea. The cosmos of the Mediterranean, rich in geographic variety, is further fragmented and colored by national borders and political-economic differences. This brings us into a hodgepodge of historical facts and current processes of transformation. Social events like the Arab Spring, the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, or the economic crises of capitalist societies in recent decades shaped and changed this space, and subsequently raised questions about the form of property and the role of the state in controlling production and redistribution.

The idea of "luxury for all" was already formulated in a manifesto written by artists and craftsmen at the time of the Paris Commune in 1871; the idea of a collective control of goods and property and an improvement of social living circumstances was abandoned in the last decade of the twentieth century.[1] The goal was to improve living conditions of people in cities and villages to create a more comfortable working and living environment for all. Another important actor in these processes of social transformation was the public and/or collectively administrated company (see Keynesian economic policy,[2] the self-administered Yugoslavian model,[3] etc.). With this, the market was not the sole motor for the distribution of goods, the form of collective property and the resulting communities were to play an active part. The social mission was to develop the best possible conditions for "all." Progress was seen as the idea of individuals and groups constantly contributing to social freedom. This important development was also to become an aesthetic and creative practice.

One entered the sea where the sun broke the surface. The sea covered and immersed one in the reflecting beams of the sun. One's own body was moved along with it.

The method of layering is an essential practice of the painterly process of Eden & Lernout. The artistic duo covered the "topographies" beneath with new geographical nets that are then further distended

1 Kristin Ross, Communal Luxury: *The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune* (New York: Verso, 2015).

2 John Maynard Keynes, *General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1936).

3 Branko Horvat, *The Political Economy of Socialism* (New York: Routledge, 2020). Edvard Kardelj, "Socialist Self-Management in Yugoslavia," in: *International Review of Administrative Science* (June, 1976).

by the application of paint. In that the structures beneath come partially to the surface, the process of transformation itself becomes visible. A surveying of the space is carried out by way of geometric shapes and the application of paint.

In the framework of the installation *From Somewhere in the Mediterranean*, the space of the Mediterranean is surveyed on the one hand in terms of the wealth of facets of its natural forms and the resulting atmospheres. On the other hand, it is examined in terms of its cultural and social characteristics, their intersections and linkages.

The central element of the work is a circular construction shaped of steel hanging from the ceiling. From a height of 2.5 meters, the circle hangs down to an anchor point found in the floor. The form suggests movement, a revolving. Textiles, which were dyed blue by way of a cyanotype technique, are draped on the fragile construction. The sunlight in the artists' Vienna studio left its mark on the pretreated material. If you pull apart the textiles, they can form a kind of membrane. A constructed outside/inside. A protection, a limit, a paravent, behind which something can be hidden. An entrance, an interface, a micrcosm.

In the Yugoslavian Adriatic, travelers from the Warsaw Pact could meet travelers from the NATO countries. As a child, I never thought about that, or the political division was something I wasn't aware of. Today I ask myself: Did one then talk so extensively about the question of the other, as is today so often the case?

The transformation of socialism into capitalist private property is based on the assumption that the state or the collective is economically rather sluggish and not really in the position to achieve the best possible life conditions for the population, taking mass consumption from the second half of the twentieth century as a paradigm.[4] In Western Europe as well, there was an increasing belief in the economic efficiency of private property, for in these parts of Europe public property was also increasingly privatized. In the private economy, large corporate structures formed that led to the creation of oligopolies on the markets. A somewhat paradoxical situation when we assume that the premise of capitalist competition is a high number of actors in a landscape rich in variety.[5] The ideology of market growth brought on globalization and the standardization that accompanied it. Markets were surveyed anew and covered with new structures. This process advanced rapidly, both as regards privatization and the introduction of new brands and products.

The maps in the atlas that once showed how many coal plants, tobacco and chocolate factories there were, disappeared from geography class. The nation-state turned to questions of identity politics. Who lives in a country, who is the majority, who is the minority, who migrates, who enjoys the privilege of the freedom of mobility, who is a guest, who is merely tolerated. There was now less faith in the economic innovativeness of the state and more on that of major companies, less in the power of collective action and its role in the context of shaping social freedom. Privately organized companies that act on the free market were attributed the ability to "awaken" needs and then to be able to conceive the relevant products. This conviction led to stronger trends toward marketing, that created new relationships between individuals and groups. As Silvia Federici puts it: "On the one hand, we experienced the downfall of a statist concept of

4 Dragomir Vojnić, *Ekonomija i politika tranzicije* (Zagreb: Ekonomski Institut/Informator, 1993).

5 *Markt und Moral. Colin Crouch im Gespräch mit Peter Engelmann* (Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 2014).

revolution, which for decades claimed the power of radical movements that struggled for an alternative to capitalism. On the other hand, the neoliberal efforts to subject all forms of life and knowledge to the logic of the market made us aware of the danger that we might one day live in a world in which we no longer have access to the seas, trees, and animals or to our fellow humankind that is not mediated by money."[6]

How is the question of public access to the ocean conceived? When Yugoslavia still existed, access to the Adriatic Sea was a public good, and in Croatia this is still largely the case. But in the meantime, it is now possible to acquire a permit that allows privatizing part of the public access. When I visited Klagenfurt in the late 1990s and realized that access to the Wörthersee was partially blocked to me since it was private,

I was shocked—and somehow I still am. It's puzzling. How can access to water be exclusive? The sea, the lake, the river are places of longing that belong to everyone. Aren't they? After all, they are places that bring us to a state of floating. Places of informal conversations and our own preferences.

What would a world look like in which human relations are of a purely monetary kind? One, in which there are no longer any public goods, in which there is no longer redistribution, where everyone is responsible for their own survival?

The earth's resources are ultimately a common good, as long as they are not divided by way of borders and then traded. Controlling their use via monetary units means transforming our world into a kind of numeric carousel that translates all kinds of energy into numbers and subjects our actions to a norm of interests and business relationships. First comes calculation, then action. One sees oneself compelled to work on a matrix of numbers and desires. It is difficult to escape this, unless one has already gathered enough capital to afford the luxury of "non-productivity" in this sense. Someone who has time to engage with activities like observing, immersing, reading. That seems in the meantime to have become a privilege of the successful.

How do we conceive a world today in which it is possible to not think about self-gain and existential needs and still to work and live freely?

Modernism once sought the appropriate mechanisms to achieve the axiom "luxury for all" and thus to grant the individual a certain freedom. With an eye on the Bauhaus program, Walter Gropius, for example, emphasized that the fusion of artistic practice and craftsmanship should enable a sensible functioning of everyday life. The standardization of practical life striven for by the Bauhaus did not intend a new enslavement and technification of the individual, but a freeing of life from unnecessary ballast, so that the individual could develop in a more uninhibited, in a richer fashion.[7] Another idea was to establish standard dimensions in the field of architecture. Le Corbusier, for example, worked on the development of a Modulor, a rule that translated human proportions to mathematical quantities that could serve as the source for spatial order. These spatial orders were then to be serially produced.

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6 Silvia Federici, *"Der Feminismus und die Politik der Commons,"* in: *Aufstand aus der Küche* (Münster: edition assemblage, 2012). 88.

7 Walter Gropius, *Bauhausbuch 12: Bauhausbauten Dessau* (Munich: Albert Langen Verlag, 1930).

“It’s necessary to create the mindset of the series: the mindset of constructing serial housing, the mindset of living in serial housing, the mindset of conceiving serial housing.”[8]

Very soon, the idea of such standardization was seen as too rigid and hierarchical and was subject to critique as of the 1960s. Even if an improvement of life quality in comparison to earlier times could be achieved to a certain extent, there was a longing for processes that did not posit the premise of thorough planning. The inclusion of experimentation and chance was to adapt the normed world “created” in this way to the situation-based human dimension. Serial planning could not do justice to the variety of human conditions, natural spaces, and webs of relations.

One longed for moments of improvisation, of trying things out, for an end that was not predictable, a collage of different parts that could enter into relationship with one another on several levels, but could also do without them.

The second central element in the installation *From Somewhere in the Mediterranean* consists of narratives about the light and the sea that we hear from a radio. Eden & Lernout asked authors who lived around the Mediterranean—M. G. Sanches, Lauro Ferrero, Thomas Vinau, Igiaba Scego, Anja Golob, Olja Savičević-Ivančević, Senka Mari, Dragana Tripković, Arian Leka, Jazra Khaleed, Efe Murad, Nora Nadjarian, Valérie Cachard, Marwa Melhem, Mazen Maarouf, Anat Einhar, Wagdy El-Komy, Najwa Binshatwan, Antoine Cassar, Kamel Riahi, Salah Badis, and Soukaina Habiballah—to write a text about the light in “their” part of the Mediterranean from their perspective.[9] Each author writes in the language in which they feel most at home. Shaped with subjective experiences, the writers describe the local contexts of the Mediterranean Sea and the reception of light in these places by describing facets of their own encounters. The stories were then read by the actors Maria Lohn and Jesse Inman, whose voices can be heard in the exhibition space. In English translation, they include memories of the mole in Gibraltar Harbor, the “frozen” time inside the house during the summer heat, Venice and Senegal as two sides of the same coin, women selling souvenirs, a father who is convinced that light comes from the sea . . .

This radio also recalls the pirate broadcaster *From somewhere in the Mediterranean, we are The Voice of Peace* that also served as an inspiration for the exhibition title. This broadcaster was founded by Abie Nathan in 1973 and for twenty years made a contribution to ending the conflict between Israel and Palestine. The ship was located in international waters near Tel Aviv.[10]

It was bathed in sun day in, day out.

The sun, according to Georges Bataille, is able to effortlessly generate the excesses of life. It is an energy that loses itself.[11] Or like the activism of Nathan, who understood his project as a peace mission, promoting mutual understanding and a solution to the conflict. One that did not accumulate energy, but gave it away.

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8 Le Corbusier, *Vers une architecture*, 1925, 187. Online version: https://www.mondotheque.be/wiki/images/d/d4/Corbusier_vers_une_architecture.pdf.

9 Irena Eden & Stijn Lernout, *Circle Surface Sun: From Somewhere in the Mediterranean* (Vienna: Schlebrügge Editor, 2020).

10 *The Voice of Peace*, https://thevoiceofpeace.co.il/ (last accessed: July 22, 2021).

11 Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share* (New York: Zone Books, 1988).

Near the circular steel object, as a third element in the installation a block of stacked (Euro) shipping palettes can be seen leaning with banners lying upon them. A blue banana lies on top of the ensemble. In 1989, Roger Brunet analyzed European spaces and divided them into active and passive spaces. The regions whose topographies formed the shape of the Blue Banana, are the places in which in the last decades and centuries an accumulation of capital has taken place: London, Manchester, Brussels, Amsterdam, Frankfurt am Main, Zurich, Milan, etc. The sea flows around the banana.[12] The sea now shares its earlier significance as one of the most important transit routes with the road and the rail. It still connects countries that spend more energy with those that collect more capital. For the focus was and is placed on optimizing production and the greatest possible output, so that growth, both in terms of production as in numbers, can be guaranteed. The consequences of these mechanisms are in the meantime visible. The environment and its balance are in danger. Animals, plants, people as part of it. The metaphor with the banana no longer works. The sun burns more intensely.

"When the end is absolute . . . it is possible to go so far as to sacrifice others. When it is not, only oneself can be sacrificed."[13]

Albert Camus discussed the concepts of "absolute freedom" and "absolute justice," saw them as competing with one another. If this consideration is transferred to the space of the Blue Banana, one might say that the absolute freedom of trade, without reflecting on the place and accessibility of the resources, makes a mockery of justice. We are already noticing the ecological consequences.

The implementation of absolute justice as an ideal could regulate the freedom of exchange so strongly that it would contradict it in the end. The normative of the plan would largely ignore situation-based contexts. And yet, we need to think about the justice of today's constellations of trade and work. We are living in a world in which the same work, despite what Maurice Dobb predicted, does not receive the same pay around the world, but in one of multiplying asymmetries.[14] We also do not find ourselves in a situation in which we are required to do increasingly less work, as John M. Keynes had predicted,[15] but in one where wage labor is equated with self-realization.

"I saw the sun at the bottom of the sea,"[16] wrote Albert Camus.

A series of 24 drawings is the fourth element of the installation. They are the views of light reflecting on the Mediterranean reproduced in the publication *Circle Surface Sun* that are here transferred using frottage technique to handmade paper. The sea supports. Eden & Lernout process its topographies, measure it using geometric shapes, cover it, defamiliarize it. In a similar gesture to the large and small format paintings and diptych objects that hang in the exhibition space on the wall. The prism-like shapes overlap one another. They are in part transparent and the process of painting becomes visible.

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12 Roger Brunet, "Lignes de force de l'espace européen," in: *Mappemonde 66*, (2002), 14–19.

13 Albert Camus, *The Rebe*l, trans. Anthony Bower (London: Penguin, 1971 [1953]), 233.

14 Maurice Dobb, *Wages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1928).

15 John Maynard Keynes, "Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren (1930)" in: *Essays in Persuasion* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1932), 358–373.

16 Albert Camus, *"Das Meer"* (Bordtagebuch, 1953), in: *Literarische Essays*, Rowohlt Verlag, Hamburg 1959, 187.

Operating with various colors awakes the appearance of refraction. Just as light refracts at the transition between the air and the sea. Light makes things visible, it remembers. But the experience of space is not just configured through light, but also through its shaows. In reference to the work *The Stranger* by Albert Camus and the duality of light and darkness, the artist duo composed *o.T. (circle.surface.sun.500.700.20. diptych)*, 2020, an acrylic frottage on powder-coated aluminum on HPL, two halves linked to one another. A dark one and a lighter one, on which sentences are represented (printed in frottage technique) from Camus' *The Stranger,* in which the sun operates as a subject. The beholder needs to get their orientation from the light to be able to read the text. Thinking in antagonisms characterizes Camus' oeuvre, as Christoph Kahn writes in "Albert Camus—ein Cartesianer des Absurden?" "Already in pre-Socratic thought, as in Heraclitus and Parmenides, light and darkness are posited as two complementary realities that, each negating the other, are still tied together and rely upon one another."[17] These contrasts sketch on the one hand tension and conflict, while at the same time a balance is generated in these interactions, the balance of the transition from one mood to the next, one condition to the next.

Creating relationships in order to trace, to experience, to think.

The work *From Somewhere in the Mediterranean* gathers various narratives about the Mediterranean that both reflect individual experiences and political-economic interactions. Formal practices like layering, overpainting, covering are combined with the format of the series. The techniques used enable the formation of a span linking the temporal processes and structural transformation. These become a horizon of experience in that a relational space is spanned between individual stories and the geographic space of the Mediterranean. The spoken texts draw in the visitors to the world of emotion and thus create a "personal" realm of the exhibition. This realm is expanded and structured through visual narratives that create rhizome-like structures by way of geometric surfaces. Systemic and yet individual perspectives are placed adjacent to one another. In this way, possibilities of abstract and subjective viewpoints are generated. These help to recognize the shape of one's own and "foreign" perception in the context of systemic choreographies and to recognize potentials therein.

17 Christoph Kann, "Albert Camus—ein Cartesianer des Absurden?," in: *Albert Camus oder der glückliche Sisyphos/Albert Camus ou Sisyphe heureux*, ed. Willi Jung (Bonn: V & R unipress, 2013), 60f.