

Rehearsing

Katarina Zdjelar in Conversation with Kate Briggs

Introduction

Katarina Zdjelar is an artist born in Belgrade, now based in Rotterdam, who works primarily with moving image and installation. I first met Katarina ten years ago in the context of the Piet Zwart Institute, where we both teach. We have become close friends, and now see each other as often as we can. But after recording this conversation – which took place on a sunny late summer morning in Katarina’s studio – I realized how rarely we have the opportunity to truly enter each other’s work. I am immensely grateful to Katarina for her time and generosity. For how she sets out her own investments in the space-time of preparation: what it is to charge the conditions of making an artwork and the artwork itself with what she calls ‘anticipatory energy’; her precise understandings of what rehearsal-time resists, opens and makes possible. In our conversation, we referred to the work of Roland Barthes only twice. But I invite readers to read everything that is said here as notes on the preparatory, speculative status of his last lecture course. Notes from within a practice that actively strives to stay in and with ‘to come-ness’ for the reasons unfolded below.

– Kate Briggs

KB: Katarina, if I were asked to propose a term, a condition and an interest that I see running through your body of work, I would offer ‘rehearsal’, or ‘rehearsing’. I sometimes think of your work as an ongoing, expansive inquiry into the condition of rehearsing. I wonder if you accept this description, and, if so, could we start by talking about an early work, *My Lifetime (Malaika)*, from 2012, which documents musicians from Ghanaian National Orchestra. Could you talk about how that work came into being?

KZ: Yes. And I agree: I have long been interested in the space and time of rehearsal. But it is important to quickly give a sense of the context of how that work came about. It was made upon the invitation of the Stedelijk museum in Amsterdam. Along with four Dutch artist colleagues, and five more colleagues from Ghana, also artists, I was invited to engage with the very particular colonial past of the Netherlands in the Ghanaian context. We were invited to go to Ghana to research and meet with the artistic community there, with a view to making an artwork which would be and was later on exhibited in Stedelijk Bureau – five Dutch artists went from the Netherlands to Ghana to make work, and five Ghanaian artists came to the Netherlands to make work here.

But very soon upon my arrival in Ghana, I realized that while I do live in the Netherlands and obviously Dutch history is part of my lived reality – the echoes of it are still operational, no doubt about that, in so many different ways – as an artist born in former Yugoslavia, there was something for me that was much more urgent, which was the Non-Aligned Movement, founded in Belgrade in 1961, which Ghana was part of from the very beginning.

In encounters with Ghanaian colleagues working in different fields, it became apparent that there was so much we shared, I mean in terms of that history... the Non-Aligned Movement’s commitment to anti-fascism in the context of former Yugoslavia, and how that went hand in hand with anti-colonialism, creating this very particular sense of solidarity and support.

With that history in mind, I met with the national orchestra in Ghana. For me, it was very interesting to look at examples of emancipatory forms of life – I mean of cultural life. Kwame Nkrumah, who brought independence to Ghana, was one of the five initiators of the Non-Aligned Movement. And he had this idea that both the newly freed state and the newly freed citizen are founded upon cultural institutions. So what he did was form an orchestra – the orchestra I worked with – and also founded a

museum. But because of political turmoil his museum was never finished, the funds disappeared... But the orchestra – because it was made of people, not building blocks and sand and materials – it endured in a very specific zone of activity. I would say: unprescribed activity. In the sense that the musicians involved did function as an orchestra, but they had no source of funding so this work could not be their only source of income... Nkrumah's original idea was that the new citizen would be produced as a *public* for the orchestra's performances. All the instruments were bought, money was invested. But then many, many years later, when I met the orchestra, the musicians were still playing the same instruments. They had become shared instruments, not personal to the musicians, and were in bad shape. Nevertheless, the musicians did still rehearse diligently. They did and do show up for the orchestra, not only as a way to practise music, but also as way of maintaining a space for a form of dissent and criticality, a way to keep a certain legacy alive. One of the musicians, for example, would keep an image of Kwame Nkrumah attached to his score...

So in that rehearsal space there was a very layered and complex body of people coming together and spending time together, using the opportunity to share, temporarily, that space-time of rehearsing, since all of them have different jobs, and responsibilities. But as you can see in the work, in the middle of the rehearsal someone arrives, someone else leaves, someone is tired and falling asleep – but nevertheless they all show up.

I found this fascinating: how the music they would play, the composition, the score, which is usually very rigidly defined – this is a piece of *this* length for *these* instruments – would in rehearsal-time depend very much on who was in the room at any given point. Like, if there was no cellist then there wouldn't be any cello. A cellist might come later... But their work had certain kind of flexibility, an openness to how a musical score might become something like a social score...



My Lifetime (Malaika), exhibition view, *An Anticolonial Museum*, MAU (Museum of African Art), Belgrade, curated by Ana Sladojevic (2012).

My Lifetime (Malaika) (single channel HD, video 5'37, 2012) features Ghana's National Symphony Orchestra recorded in the National Theatre in Accra. The musicians play 'Malaika', originally a cheerful and empowering postcolonial composition that was famously performed by musical celebrities such as Miriam Makeba, Harry Belafonte, Boney M. and many others. The orchestra was founded in the late 1950s when Ghana, under the leadership of Kwame Nkrumah, became independent from the United Kingdom. Nkrumah's government introduced new cultural structures in order to establish and enforce national consciousness and accomplish the shift from colonial rule to independence.

In his text 'Sounding the Social', David Markus writes:

The musical performances staged in the video work of Katarina Zdjelar frequently allegorize broad social or political realities. In a piece titled *My Lifetime (Malaika)*, 2012, we observe rag-tag members of Ghana's National Symphony Orchestra rehearsing 'Malaika' [...] Throughout the work, Zdjelar's camera remains concentrated on the scored sound boards and corroded brass instruments of a clearly underfinanced ensemble as well as on the languid gestures of the players, which bespeak a general fatigue precipitated by their ordinary lives as day laborers. This atmosphere of weariness is reflected in the music itself, which ambles along, not quite on tempo, not quite in key. Introduced into Ghana by the British, European orchestral music sits uneasily within the country's rich musical traditions. Bearing the burden both of national pride and colonial heritage, the performers in Zdjelar's video – one of whom nods off in his seat at the video's conclusion – are arbiters of a hybrid cultural form whose vitality in its present context appears to have been exhausted.¹

KB: I am so interested in this: in all the ways you make in this space of practice and practising appear – the doing, the showing up, as you put it, not everyone is there but most people are there, all of them preparing for a future moment of performance, of achievement, even virtuosity. But the point is, you're not showing that moment. Instead, you're showing us the moments, durations, the temporalities of practising and that's where you locate what you called the sustaining or emergence of a certain form of criticality, that's where you locate the capacity to keep a legacy alive. In practising for, in valuing that time, and not (yet) the moment of virtuoso, perfected, ticketed performance... Could you talk a bit more where the artistic decision came from – to value and attend to the practising, the rehearsing-time? Because it feels so crucial to what you're doing, not only in this work but through later works also...

KZ: Yes, to everything you said. Absolutely. Elevating practice-time over performance-time has to do with an understanding of my own role and presence as a maker, in relation to the so-called set and the people I work with and film. It has to do with the way I understand my own position. For me, there was a very particular shared history and legacy, as I said. A legacy with its own potency of anticipation. There was a sense of charging the space with anticipation, and continuously charging it. In ways that suggest that there is something that is still yet to come, whether that be a performance or a different future. But at the same time, preparation is already making that future tangible. Making it possible. It is already beginning to mark out the contours of what is to-come. So in that sense, I think of the charged space of rehearsing as the only way to make that space of possibilities tangible – the only possible way. Because I also strongly shy away from forms of life which are stagnant, rigid or fixed...

KB: Or finished?

KZ: Or finished. I would say, I don't – I don't subscribe to finishedness. In my work as in my life I want to always stay in ongoingness, in movement, in exploring what is possible and charging the space of possibility, embracing the contingent nature of those encounters that are only possible when sharing and spending time together...

KB: Under certain specific conditions... such as the more unprescribed conditions of rehearsal-time? That sense of: we are just practising...

KZ: Yes.

KB: There is so much more to say about what you have just shared. But what I am thinking of first are the ways you choose to exhibit your work, whether in group shows or solo shows. You are always putting your works into new arrangements and constellations – you’ve spoken to me about your willingness to re-edit existing film and video works for new contexts. It’s as if you don’t accept the finishedness even of your own artworks, even after they have been exhibited, encountered a public, even won you prizes. As an artist you’re constantly undoing their finishedness, rediscovering their charge again, rediscovering their potentialities. That seems to me to be quite a remarkable way of working, but wholly coherent with the value you place on rehearsing...

KZ: Yes, I do think that any formalization is always a temporary one.

KB: Right. Yes.

KZ: It’s only under certain specific conditions that I agree to freeze or pause a moment, and give form to something.

KB: An always temporary formalization. But perhaps a necessary one? Would you say that the temporary stopping is also what allows for an encounter, for something that might be called a work?

KZ: Yes...

KB: There is something so Barthesian in that, I mean – your interest... not only your interest but your *commitment* to the temporary immobilization of what is essentially, inherently mobile. Your willingness to remobilize what was temporarily caught on film, through re-editing, through re-contextualization, through finding new relations and resonances between your works and the works of others...

In terms of your own process, your own readying – this trip to Ghana involved a commission to produce a new work. But I wonder: to what degree were you prepared? What forms of preparation did you make for that encounter? Had you decided ahead of time that you would be working with the national orchestra? These are questions of practical preparation...

KZ: In this particular case, I did my research. And I really wanted to work with the orchestra, so it's not that I encountered them there. But then, I didn't know if the collaboration would be possible. Would they be open to something like this? Especially as I don't show them in a flattering light, if you like. I wasn't representing the orchestra in its full glory of excellent musicianship – although they are excellent musicians, absolutely!

But for me there is always this question: whether or not my collaborators will be willing to engage with me on the level of, let's say, shared vulnerability. My invitation to them was create this meeting. Then in this meeting we are there with each other, and we don't know exactly what will happen. They are in rehearsal, but I too am in rehearsal, with my camera. I didn't have a script. I didn't know what piece they would be rehearsing, I didn't know who would be sitting where... They were in a vulnerable situation, in the sense that they were being observed, their rehearsal was being filmed and their mistakes captured. But I was capturing from the position having never done this before... For me it was the first time in that situation and there was so much I didn't know, I mean cinematically – who is where and who is doing what – so I too am improvising. The rehearsal room is in a certain sense a controlled environment but once inside it there are all forms of contingency and improvisation.

KB: And openness – a collective openness to what *could* happen within that frame?

As you were talking, Kat, it occurred to me: we tend to think of rehearsal as a term for something whose future is determined. Something has been scripted, like a play, and the date of the performance has been set, and we'll be rehearsing this thing until we arrive at the moment of more or less perfection, at least some form of control if not mastery of the material. The point where everyone knows their lines, their notes and so on. But what you're opening up is a practice of rehearsing for something to come, charging the space with anticipation, as you said earlier. But whatever that something *is* or will be or could be has not yet been scripted. The scripting folds back into the time of rehearsal, a space-time where you might discover what it is you're preparing for...

KZ: Yes, and sometimes that might be just another rehearsal...

KB: Right, right! But that sounds to me like an incredibly resonant and generative description what it might be to prepare for an art work – what

it is to be engaged in such a process. It speaks to the forms of not-knowing that are required when you enter a space of making. A space of vulnerability, a very particular kind of situation where, as you say, there are whole sets of risks and uncertainties – Will there be a film, even? To relate this back to Barthes and his project to write a novel, so much has been said and written about whether or not this was ever a fully envisaged, plausible outcome. But the way you describe art-making happening for you, the point is: you have to create the conditions wherein a film has a chance of emerging, but those conditions are such that you can never guarantee it. It's important that you hold that open. I'm thinking now of your work *Not a Pillar not a Pile*, where once again you set up a context, you make an invitation to others to come in and work with you, you open up a time for being together, the rationale for which has been deeply researched and thought-through. But at the same time, there is a sense that, in the moment of rehearsal, you also don't exactly know what you're seeking. You don't know what will emerge... This relates for me to something you said earlier about your interest in the orchestra and not the museum. Or rather how your interest in the museum shifted to orchestra, because unlike the museum it still exists – to be built the museum depended on funding and bricks and sand. There was a very specific plan to be realized and in the end it failed, the building work stopped, the museum didn't get finished. But the orchestra didn't stop. Why? Because it involved bodies, because the plan was always looser, because its basis was this group formation...

KZ: Yes, a community...

KB: A community, indeed, with its practices of knowledge-sharing and support that don't depend on a specific building, or even specific individuals being there all the time. And it's because of this flexibility that it can continue. It seems to me that in your work on Käthe Kollwitz and Dore Hoyer, titled *Not a Pillar not a Pile (Dance for Dore Hoyer)*, you are actually *producing* a new community of this order. I mean, through the way the work gathers specific bodies and invites them to work and move together in order to re-activate an inheritance of movements and gestures, to keep a legacy alive. And again there's this sense in the video-work that what is going on here is not going to simply stop... Could you talk a little bit about that project, and the materials you were working with or rehearsing with there – bodies, histories, practices, relations?

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Not a Pillar not a Pile (Dance for Dore Hoyer), installation view solo exhibition *Katarina Zdjelar: Proximities, a rehearsal, an archive*, curated by Lucy Cotter at Oregon Contemporary, USA (2022).

The video titled *Not a Pillar not a Pile (Tanz für Dore Hoyer)* (11'39" loop and 4 channel installation) was produced on the occasion of an exhibition at Kunstal Rotterdam for the Prix de Rome 2017, for which Katarina Zdjelar was one of the four finalists. It is inspired by archival documents from an all-women's dance studio founded in 1945 in post-war Dresden by Dore Hoyer, a choreographer and expressionist dancer, whose choreographies took the graphic works of artist Käthe Kollwitz as their departure point. Zdjelar's film installation departs from this artistic meeting between Kollwitz and Hoyer as a manifestation of shared affinities with (proto) feminist pacifism, solidarity and collective transformation across the barriers of time, class and social difference. Drawing the past into the present, Zdjelar gathered an international group of dancers and activists to create this filmic work. Their costumes and the film set bear a pattern created by women workers of *Pausa* textile factory in Germany, whose anti-fascist resistance resonates with that of Hoyer and of Kollwitz, whose graphic works are in turn echoed in the wood cut floor panels. In the resulting film installation one body encounters another as a site of resistance and possibility, pointing to the fragile agency of collective action in the present.

KZ: It's important to note that I do indeed engage in a very thorough process of research, in solitude, before working with others. It is a long process that precedes any invitation to others to join me. But once the invitation has been made the process changes, it becomes charged with a very different, non-prescriptive attitude. For the time of working together I am porous, available, present. And the participants I invite, we meet on the level of being co-present, open and willing to be together in that space. As part of this, I am always very concrete about who I invite...

KB: [*laughter*] Yes, because not everyone can enter that space and be with you? The vulnerability you mentioned earlier – it requires a certain degree of trust and understanding...

KZ: Exactly, so there are a few very precise and fixed elements which need to be in place to enable the unforeseen, the unscripted work – for an encounter to unfold. I think of my work as all about unfolding encounters...

KB: In *My Lifetime* you're very clearly representing rehearsal-time. But in the later works you make us feel like we are still in that space of testing, trying out, practices... The work seems to *invoke* rehearsal-time but without directly representing it...

KZ: Yes, absolutely. There was a score for that work, but not a musical or a choreographic score. Instead, I proposed to take a number of etchings and drawings by Käthe Kollwitz as our score, along with a few photographs by Dore Hoyer who made a choreography in 1945, which was based on the same drawings and etchings. Then I gathered a group of artists, performers and activists, who – because of the way they work and their ethics – were people with whom I genuinely wanted to explore Käthe Kollwitz's proposition of solidarity and resistance in the face of fascism and its relevance to the manifestations of fascism we are being confronted with today. I was very interested in trying to make that *relation* between these two different historical moments tangible...

KB: I find this all so interesting – the way you are quite explicitly marking out a site *of* or *for* resonance in this work rather than direct commentary or representation. And the ways you conceive of this as a means of keeping a legacy alive – through gestures of activation, reactivation, I would even

say of translation. The rehearsal space as a place to remobilize an existing body of work and discover its resonances with today...

KZ: Yes, absolutely. Especially because, with respect to Käthe Kollwitz, her work was in my view immobilized in a very particular way. As I was researching her practices and reading her diaries I realized that the accepted narrative around her work does not do justice to her thinking and making. There are parts of it that have been completely suppressed, and collapsed into this very heteronormative, nationalistic artistic narrative. For example, the way she considered her own body as an object to look at and to learn from, not for its own sake but precisely in order to depict and be in solidarity with other bodies. For me, there is an immense task, as we open the archives – as we open the archives of artistic colleagues across historical distance – to approach the work almost as if we had never seen it before... As we worked on *Not a Pillar not a Pile* we were actually physically reading these images, we closed our eyes and were touching them with our hands, trying to understand them anew...

KB: We spoke earlier about your resistance to finishedness. And here we have another example of that resistance to all the ways in which a famous, internationally celebrated body of work gets fixed and finalized. Your intervention here seems to be all about actively unfixing, undoing...

KZ: Releasing...

KB: Releasing! Yes, exactly. Pulling at the threads, touching at the materials so that the work might once again become alive and participatory...

Could we talk about two even more recent works: *Reading 'Europe, Where Have You Displaced Love?'* (2019) and *Gaze is a Bridge* (2023)? What these very different works share is once again the staging of a space where as viewers we sense that there something to come, we are anticipating something to come. Also, we are invited to encounter a group, or a pair. But it is not entirely clear, by which I mean it has been left deliberately undetermined what their relationships are to each other. It's not like we're obviously looking at a family unit, or a band, a couple. We know there's a group in formation but we're not sure of the terms of involvement. Children wander in and out but we're not quite sure whose they are...? Which relates to what you observed about the rehearsal-time of the orchestra in Ghana – people can come in and they can leave again. But nevertheless it is clear that these individuals are meeting around something

like a common activity, even if that too has been left open and unprescribed.

I wonder if you could talk more about non-prescription, and this invitation to be and do together, where the terms are set out very openly and lightly. I feel like there is something deeply hopeful, even emancipatory about it. As if this is what you're proposing in your work: new conditions of group formation, new reasons to spend meaningful time together, not only among people gathered in the same room, but across time, across generations...

In *Reading "Europe Where Have You Displaced Love?"* (single channel video, 29:26 min, 2019), Katarina Zdjelar brings together four musicians for an improvised interpretation of a text by the same title written by poet Athena Farrokhzad. The aim of the improvisation is not so much to arrive at a final performance, but rather to keep the range of possibilities open. One by one the musicians take control and then let it go again just before arriving at a common melody, at which point doubts or another voice steer the process in a different direction.

KZ: I am thinking about what you said in relation to rehearsal... and this is really just now occurring to me. In that work, 'Europe, Where Have You Misplaced Love?', as you said, you're not quite sure who is who and where is this taking place or even what is taking place...

KB: Or why!

KZ: Or why is it taking place... But you do understand that something is being rehearsed, so there is the horizon of a possible performance. There is an aim, right? It is not simply a group of friends getting together to have dinner, or sing a song. You sense they are working on something...

KB: There is a purposefulness.

KZ. There is purposefulness. But it is unclear what kind of purpose it is. So there is that. But then it is happening in a domestic space. And childcare, where does that belong? How does that relate to the labour of working on a song? Are they even working on a song? How does the anticipation of publicness come together with the more domestic tasks, the time one spends cooking or looking after children, which is also what enables public-facing performance. How do these times and spaces meet?

KB: But they are meeting! That's what is so important: in your work, they are meeting and overlapping...

KZ: They are meeting there, and I think this is precisely what the rehearsal *can* do. What it can offer.

KB: Yes. Yes.

KZ: As a form.

KB: As if rehearsal brings with it precisely that possibility of unlikely group formation, a crisscrossing of trajectories and purposes and spaces we are conditioned to keep so far apart...

KZ: Exactly, exactly.

KB: Because if it's a rehearsal, 'only' a rehearsal, then I can actually bring my kid along, and they can be there and witness or even participate...

KZ: Exactly. That's it – the rehearsal space is a space-time which allows all these normative structures, all these different rules and systems of value and engagement – to collapse for a while. We can cut through them, horizontally.

KB: And that's why – would you say that is why it is a space-time that speaks to you and holds you?

KZ: Yes. I'm thinking now of painterly tableaux, the history of painting, where there is very often such a specific division of roles. Or, when you think about theatre, or music: how roles get assigned and fixed. We know who is playing the cello, who is conducting, who is playing Macbeth, and so on. We know who is who. But for time of the rehearsal, and in my work, that assignment is made temporary.

KB: It is more flexible.

KZ: Exactly. So everybody is fixed but everybody is also in motion. People can play different parts.

KB: I want to end on something you said earlier: about an unclear, unprescribed, not entirely legible purposefulness. But a purposefulness nevertheless. We're both educators and I am thinking of the work we do in the context of the art school. How we often have the privilege of witnessing an artist doing something, starting on something, initiating a process – which might look like nothing of worth or value in relation to the ways these things generally get decided. But they're doing it, even if they are not yet capable of articulating what exactly their purpose or intention might be. I guess what I am saying is: unprescribed purposefulness seems to me to be the condition of artmaking. It's one that is so important to protect. For me, this would be one way of articulating what I see as the critical force of your works: their resistance to dominant systems of value distribution. This pressure to produce a finished product, a finalized work. To know ahead of time what is being produced.

KZ: Yes, the way I see it there is no progression in my works. At the end of a timeline there is no resolution.

KB: No plot?

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Gaze is a Bridge, still image from the video (2023).

Gaze is a Bridge (2023) was filmed during Katarina Zdjelar's visits to Zagreb in December 2022. The video is inspired by Nasta Rojc and her painting *Self-Portrait with a Rifle* (1912) as well as the work and personal story of photographer and video artist Ana Opalić. The biographies of these two women, determined by the right to choose freedom and love, lived out in two different periods almost a century apart, intertwine with each other. It is precisely this temporal gap that highlights how our society and community have evolved in awareness and openness, how sensitized we, as a society, have become to others and to the different, and how much (if any) progress we have made in the context of accepting diversity and the right to choice and self-determination.

KZ: No plot. Nothing has been achieved. And yet there is all this work. The answer to why we have been going through the motions of working together, moving together, testing, investigating, rehearsing – it's withheld. The point is to stay in that space of potential, to value it, and to keep charging it.

KB: To remain in preparation.

KZ: Exactly.

Notes

¹ David Markus, 'Sounding the Social', *Art in America*, 101.8 (September 2013), 107–13 (pp. 111–13).

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Kate Briggs is a writer, editor and translator based in Rotterdam, where she teaches at the Piet Zwart Institute and co-runs the micro-publishing and collaborative learning project Short Pieces That Move! She is the author of *This Little Art* (an essay on the practice of translation) and *The Long Form* (a novel; shortlisted for the Goldsmiths' Prize and the US Republic of Consciousness Prize). She translated two volumes of Roland Barthes's lecture courses at the Collège de France; her translation of Hélène Bessette's *Lili pleure* will be published in 2025. In 2021 she was awarded a Windham-Campbell Award for non-fiction.

Katarina Zdjelar grew up in Belgrade and is currently based in Rotterdam. Working mainly in the medium of moving image and installation, her work explores the way one body encounters another as a site of resistance and possibility, pointing to the fragile agency of collective action in the present. Voice, music, sound and language are core interests throughout her practice. Zdjelar holds an MA in Fine Art from the Piet Zwart Institute in Rotterdam, she is a graduate of the University of Arts Belgrade and completed a two-year residency at the *Rijksakademie* in Amsterdam. Zdjelar represented Serbia at the 53rd Venice Biennale and has participated in numerous solo and group exhibitions internationally at such venues as 11th Berlin Biennale, Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam; Metropolitan Museum of Photography, Tokyo; Frieze Foundation, London; Casino Luxembourg; De Appel, Amsterdam, MACBA Barcelona; MCOB Museum of Contemporary Art Belgrade; Museum Sztuki Lodz. She has been awarded several prizes, most recently the MMSU Award of the 24th Zagreb Salon (2019), the Dolf Henkes Prize (2017), and she was one of the nominees for the Dutch Prix de Rome Award (2017). Zdjelar is also an educator in her post as a core tutor at Piet Zwart Institute (MA Fine Art), WdKA Rotterdam and the Nederlandse Filmacademie (MA Artistic Research) in Amsterdam.

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