

A pacifist is a rare beast in a bomb shelter

Shortly before the end of this year's edition of SPRING, Theaterkrant published an article by Dr. Sruti Bala - being her critical opinion about the context of the concert by the Ukrainian band DakhaBrakha – which was part of the opening night of SPRING 2023. I am glad that Dr. Bala shared her opinion and concerns. I was not able to respond to the published text right after the festival, but as many of the addressed issues remain valid, and as the text by Dr. Bala raises some questions and comments also directly towards the festival, I would like to take the opportunity to answer them.

Sruti Bala expresses her concern that the concert in question was not an anti-war event. And indeed, the presence of Ukrainian artists on stage was first and foremost an artistic event. But as it happens often, an artistic event is being settled in the complex social and political context which both artists and audience bring to the event.

Let me shortly explain how DakhaBrakha (part of the famous DAKH Performing Arts Center in Kyiv) became part of the opening event of this year's edition. Since my arrival to SPRING in 2021 I expressed many times the importance of the festival as a space where an encounter between different, often not visible, communities is possible. In the international SPRING program we find it important to include the perspective of artistic practices and voices from the so called semi-peripheries, including Central and Eastern Europe. The part of the world I come from, and a part of the world which often gets less attention in the discussions focused on globalization and decolonization in The Netherlands, even if both topics are extremely relevant for that region.

DakhaBrakha arrived thus to Utrecht as an excellent artistic project from Eastern Europe. Cherished equally by those in the auditorium who knew the band and were there for them, as well as festival invitees, listening to the musicians for the first time ever. For me this was the first success of the evening.

There is no doubt however, that the DakhaBrakha artists come to Utrecht in a specific and extremely complex context. As artists whose country has been invaded by another country, as citizens of an occupied and forcefully resisting country holding an attack of a much bigger and forceful enemy, as artists who try to position their role in a time when their homeland, families and friends are experiencing dreadful violence. What is the role of an artist in such a moment?

By coincidence, almost parallel to the visit of DakhaBrakha, a book had been published in Amsterdam under the significant title „Passivity, Between Indifference and Pacifism”^[3]. The authors – the Ukrainian visual artist Alexandra Tryanova and Belgian sociologist and researcher Pascal Gielen bring a variety of artistic attitudes towards current military invasion on their country. There are artists who decide to protect their homeland with weapons in hands, there are others who try to animate the life of their community in this time of exception, there are also others who, using their artistic practice, advocate for the truth and make their case hearable and visible. The artists around DAKH execute all of those strategies and DakhaBrakha decided for the last one. Can it be called propaganda, as Dr. Bala suggests?

Sruti Bala sees a direct referring in the concert to the Russian aggression on Ukraine as a glorification of war. That is a concept we as SPRING want to oppose. We do not find a glorification of war in the statement which the band displayed on stage between the songs: „Russia is a terrorist state” or „Ukraine will win”. What is the semantic difference between „winning” and „overcoming” - the other word proposed by Dr. Bala? I did not hear during the concert calls to attack Russia, I did not hear calls for revenge. I did hear a call to protect the integrity of state, independence of its citizens and freedom of culture. For those exposed to the daily risk of rape, torture and bullets, this protection will not arrive through singing pacifist songs as Dr. Bala would prefer. This might be only the next chapter - after the aggressor is stopped.

The already mentioned book by Tryanova and Gielen, is the same from which I took the opening quotation of this text. As Gielen writes „Ukrainians do not need sympathy, they need solidarity”. In the calls of DakhaBrakha „Arm Ukraine now” and references to „come back alive” – Dr. Bala sees symptoms of a „war machine”. I see purely a call for solidarity with those who do not have tools to stand against those who have those tools. In a movie displayed during the concert Dr. Bala sees young people cheering their military service, I see people who ended in the army against their wish and were not prepared to that - and, being in this „war machine” they still try to protect their human integrity.

Above all, I believe it is a matter of context. Things might look differently, when observed from different points of views. We could discuss further about videos and visuals. About quotations on backscreens and texts of songs. There is however one part of Sruti Bala’s text which I find difficult to accept. And it is the specific positioning of the situation of Ukraine in the global context. I do not agree that the voice of Ukraine comes on the expense of any other community around the world. With no doubt, in the time of globalization, we need to see things in a broader context. I am however skeptical to Dr. Bala’s call to see the Russian aggression through the perspective of Brazil or South Africa. As much as we at SPRING want to hear the story about Ukraine being told by Ukrainians, we are also curious to hear the story about Brazil being told by Brazilians. We are also more interested what Indonesian researchers or artists have to say about the history and present of Indonesia, then to read the perspective being produced (even from postcolonial perspective) in academic centers in The Netherlands. Perspectives of propaganda, decolonization, power games need to be recognized from more than one side only.

An interesting perspective was recently brought by art historian Asia Bazdyrieva following last year’s Berlinale at e-flux^[4]. She outlines how the Russian Federation has hijacked the postcolonial discourse and tension between the so-called Global South and Global North, in order to build propaganda that fits Russia’s colonial ideology (called „Russkiy mir”) and would prove supremacy over neighboring countries.

One can ask if the strength of the message of Ukrainian artists at SPRING would be equal without straight communication about their world. During their recent Western European tour DakhaBrakha has been asked sometimes to perform without war references for the sake of „neutrality”. I doubt if this is a proper field to exercise neutrality. And for sure I will not censor any artist invited to our festival - also as somebody that experienced censorship back in my country.

I hope SPRING will stay a festival where indeed the different communities living in The Netherlands might find the unique chance to meet and exchange, and also to learn from each

other and break stereotypes. A place where the Dutch audience can step outside their everyday topics, and see the world from a bit different, broader and more complex perspective. I hope it will stay the place where we can discuss both questions of esthetics as well as the most urgent political topics from all around the world. We are at least determined to stay faithful to this mission in the next years to come.

Grzegorz Reske – Artistic Director SPRING Performing Arts Festival

[1] <https://valiz.nl/publicaties/passiviteit>

[2] <https://www.e-flux.com/criticism/529815/73rd-berlin-international-film-festival-forum-expanded>

[3] <https://valiz.nl/publicaties/passiviteit>

[4] ^[4] <https://www.e-flux.com/criticism/529815/73rd-berlin-international-film-festival-forum-expanded>