II. Lesbian Visibility in Slovenia

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ABSTRACT The article surveys lesbian culture and movement in Slovenia. Both are coinciding with media representations of lesbianism and lesbian visual arts, the latter beginning with the shocking exhibition 'Obscene Women' by Austrian photographer Krista Beinstein in 1986. The international lesbian exhibition 'Lesbian ConneXions', which visited the Slovenian capital of Ljubljana in October 2000, represented images of lesbians in a very broad and realistic spectrum, in contrast with the asexual lesbian photographs by unknown authors in the Slovenian mainstream press and in accordance with the depictions of lesbians in Slovenian lesbian press. The photographs from 'Lesbian ConneXions' were, like Beinstein's exhibition, not very well accepted; even some lesbians argued that some of the photos, especially those of gender-benders, did not represent real and everyday lesbian life but rarities and odd exceptions. But lesbian life in general, far from being an 'ordinary' Slovenian lifestyle, may easily become unrecognizable to lesbians themselves and obscured by the dominant culture.

KEY WORDS culture ◆ images ◆ lesbian and gay movement ◆ media representations ◆ visibility ◆ visual arts

The beginnings of lesbian culture and lesbian visual arts in Slovenia coincides to some extent with the photo exhibition 'Obscene Women' by the Austrian photographer Krista Beinstein, which was shown as part of the yearly Magnus Gay Festival in the capital, Ljubljana, in June 1986. Fourteen years later, in October 2000, quite a different kind of major lesbian visual arts event took place in the Slovenian capital: it was visited by the international exhibition 'Lesbian ConneXion/s', a travelling exhibition, showing images created by 60 photographers from 15 countries. With my point of departure in these two visual arts events in Ljubljana, and their contribution to lesbian visibility in Slovenia, I discuss the emergence of a lesbian movement in this country in the last two decades of the 20th century.

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THE 1980S: THE EARLY BEGINNINGS

Homosexuality and lesbianism became visible in Slovenia in the 1980s in the wake of movements for civil rights and peace. Among the groups that formed in that decade were the gay group Magnus (1984), the feminist group Lilit (1985) and the lesbian group LL (Lesbian Lilit) (1987). The first gay initiative was the Magnus cultural festival in 1984 in Ljubljana. LL was formed in September 1987 as a part of Lilit. In 1988, LL became an autonomous and independent section (Sekcija) of SKUC (Students' Cultural Centre). The purpose of LL was to break the silence about lesbian lifestyles and culture in Slovenian society. It was the first lesbian group in Slovenia and in the former Yugoslavia, and, furthermore, one of the few lesbian groups in Eastern Europe at that time. Throughout the 1980s and the 1990s, LL published different newsletters *Lesbozine* (1987–9), *Pandora* (1990–6) and *Lesbo* (1997 onwards). Moreover, LL organized a lesbian video and film festival, lectures, dances, meetings, summer camps, discussions and workshops.

Let us take a closer look at the early beginnings of a lesbian movement in Slovenia. Even before the establishment of LL in 1987, Ljubljana was surprised – and shocked – by a lesbian photo exhibition. In June 1986, the Viennese photographer Krista Beinstein exhibited in the SKUC Gallery during the Magnus Gay Festival. The exhibition was titled 'Obszöne Frauen' or 'Obscene Women'. The photographs presented S/M lesbians, lesbians with dildos in toilettes who in a certain sense imitated gay subculture, hot femmes in garters and wild make-up, self portraits of Krista Beinstein and/or her lover and a famous photo of her lover in garters and with a whip, which was also a cover poster for the exhibition. The photos were not beautiful depictions of traditionally attractive women, but images of lesbians in leather, or half-naked, or with S/M paraphernalia, and most importantly, they were images of women who are into sex. The Viennese photographer shocked, surprised and repulsed the visitors with her 'Obscene Women'. Some people thought that she simply fitted into the concept of the counter-culture (punk) of those days; some were shocked because they found the exhibition non-feminist (or even anti-feminist); most feminists and some lesbians said, 'No, we are not like that . . .'. Members of the feminist group Lilit stated that they were not against the exhibition per se, but they were certainly not in favour of it and they would never have brought it to Ljubljana themselves.

Nevertheless, Krista Beinstein made an impact on the emerging lesbian community. The lesbian movement was just emerging in Slovenia at that time, and it was, as if the 'excessiveness' which characterized the photographs made the general marginality and absence of lesbian themes within the Magnus gay festivals (1984–7) very conspicuous. In a way, it emphasized lesbianism as a sideshow of an otherwise well-(re)presented

gay male subculture. Moreover, with its different and daring images of lesbians, licentiously showing off dildos, which can so inexorably incriminate lesbian images and / or purity, 'Obscene Women' contributed to an expansion of identity borders and gave inspiration to ideas about different ways for lesbians to be sexual.

With Krista Beinstein lesbians became visible in Slovenia in a new way. The question of visibility is an important theme for lesbian culture, politics and activism in general. Lesbianism is under pressure of visibility in a double sense. First, there is a certain public requirement that lesbianism is uncovered, unmasked, or even 'confessed', and second, on the part of lesbians themselves, there is a need to step out of anonymity and to build communities. Visibility is a kind of declaration of the 'reality' of lesbian existence, and for an emerging community like the one that was under formation in Slovenia in the mid-1980s this is particularly important. Why? Compared to male homosexuality, lesbianism was almost unknown / unacknowledged, unrecognizable and enigmatic; even today its existence is under question in many places. This explains the public curiosity: the requirement for uncovering and the constant popping up of questions such as 'What do lesbians look like?', 'What do they do together?' Furthermore, there is the other side of the coin: the emerging lesbian community's own quest for visibility, which takes its point of departure in the potential power of the visual image, its ability to emphasize existence: 'I am what I am . . .'.

The pressing need for lesbian images and visibility was especially obvious during the first years of the lesbian movement in Slovenia, because it is so difficult to trace lesbian women or lesbian subcultures in the Slovenian past before the 1980s. There were some lesbian writers in the 20th century, but they rarely wrote explicitly about lesbian themes, and literary history was most of the time silent about their sexual or gender difference. One of the most important lesbian women of the past was a lawyer and a writer, Ljuba Prenner (1906–77), a butch woman who was known as 'a woman with a male soul' (Gabrič et al., 2000). She was rediscovered by lesbians and feminists in the 1980s and 1990s and very recently also by other literary researchers. However, the majority of literary scholars describes Ljuba Prenner as a woman who was 'brave enough to be different' (Gabrič et al., 2000), but not as a butch lesbian who had female lovers. Until the last two or three years, photos of Prenner were, furthermore, rarely shown and her name was seldom mentioned publicly, even though she wrote the first Slovenian detective story. Some of her contemporaries depict Ljuba Prenner in their memoirs. They describe her as a woman who introduced herself as a person who was neither female nor male, and who sometimes even referred to herself as a man. Many cited Prenner's strong political statement that wearing trousers was the best thing that socialism gave her (Gabrič et al., 2000). What was always stressed was her gender

difference, but not her sexuality. Because she 'looked like a man' most of her contemporaries and the literary historians have described her looks as a special phenomenon or as a mixture of gender characteristics, but they have never used the words 'lesbian' or 'butch'.

THE 1990S: DISPERSION AND PROLIFERATION OF ACTIVITIES

In 1990, LL and Magnus set up the Roza klub (Pink Club), a political organization of lesbian and gay people. The Roza klub fought for changes in the new Slovenian Constitution[1] that would have included the term 'sexual orientation' among other personal circumstances for which discrimination is prohibited. Unfortunately, the efforts of the Roza klub did not succeed: the term was not explicitly written into the new constitution.

By the end of the 1990s, the lesbian/gay movement in Slovenia had become increasingly dispersed among multiple activities (social life, publishing, helpline, etc.), small groups and political orientations. By the end of the decade, there were several groups: Sekcija LL; the mixed gay and lesbian group Roza klub; gay group Magnus, the lesbian-feminist group Kasandra; and a gay and lesbian youth organization called Legebitra. In 2001, group LL is opening a Lesbian Library and Archive in Ljubljana.

What has happened to ideas about what a lesbian looks/should look like in the period between the Krista Beinstein exhibition and today? The reactions in Slovenia to the vast travelling exhibition 'Lesbian ConneXion/s' may illustrate the complicated picture.

The 'Lesbian ConneXion/s' exhibition opened at the 1998 Gay Games in Amsterdam as a great juxtaposition of artistic compositions and illegally shot photos with an implicit political intent. By presenting images created by Western, Eastern and Southern European artists, the exhibition developed from a lesbian cultural reference point into an exploration of lesbian diversity. Almost three years later, 'Lesbian ConneXion/s 'is still touring Europe. Success in Amsterdam and Ghent, where the city mayor opened the exhibition, led to engagements in other cities. The collection was displayed in the Slovenian capital, Ljubljana, in October 2000, as part of the annual City of Women festival, and in the Croatian capital, Zagreb, October/November 2000.

Conceptually and thematically, the exhibition is both an artistic and an activist project. Taking it as a starting point that lesbian visibility is a question of all domains of lesbian lifestyle, it was completely up to the contributing artists to choose the themes – as cited from the catalogue: 'There are so many ways of life as there are lesbian women.'[2] In 1995, the Dutch photographers Marian Bakker and Traude Buhrmann set out to make visual the vast variety of lifestyles, options, meanings and visions

that exist in lesbian circles. They invited photographers from all over Europe (East and West) to submit work on any subject – as long as there was a lesbian connection. The result is an amazing travelling exhibition of images created by 60 photographers from 15 countries. The photographs present portraits of lesbians and lesbian couples, of young and older lesbians, lesbian families, lesbians of colour, lesbians playing butch and femme roles, of sport lesbians, of disabled lesbians, of lesbians participating in lesbian/gay events. The photographs also present more provocative images of lesbians changing gender (by hormones), or impersonating men as well as more erotically inspired shots. The project succeeds in joining art and political proliferation, and *un fil rouge* through the diversity of the exhibition is exactly the numerous 'genuine' images, making lesbians and and lesbian experiments with roles visible. Photographers from West and East introduce lesbian lives in multilayered ways – sometimes almost on the level of documentary or family shots. The international nature of this travelling lesbian family album is entirely in accordance with the activist slogan 'We Are Everywhere' in a geographical and cultural sense, even more so because the exhibition gives ample space to different lesbian cultural trends without setting limits on the grounds of political correctness. One of the interesting images that combines symbols taken from various areas: punk, feminism, lesbianism, is a photo by a Greek photographer, Maria Catsicadacou.[3] It portrays a girl with a shaved head. She wears a short dress, a feminist logo around her neck and a dildo that, at first sight, looks like a girdle.

Slovenian photographer Jasna Klančišar participates with a photo of a model with no head, made in the safe environment of the studio with a focus on aesthetics as Marian Bakker states.[4] Together with Aquarius, Manja Zore, Sonja Lebedinec, Aleksandra Vajd and Nika Jakšič, Jasna Klančišar is one of the Slovenian homosexuals who – in contrast to many others – actually have asserted themselves by regularly publishing their photographs in lesbian/gay press (see *Pandora*, *Revolver*, *Lesbo* and the book *L – An Anthology of the Lesbian Movement in Slovenia, 1984–1995*).

The pictures on the exhibition sometimes show specific everyday situations in different countries. The photos from Eastern Europe especially do not present big lesbian venues or outdoor public events (such as prides) as they are still not common in those countries. This is, for example, the case as far as Klančišar's photos are concerned. Russian photographer Renata Babushkina photographs her lesbian models as an interesting persiflage of Communist propaganda, using Communist style and depiction. Taken from a low angle, the models dressed in bright clothes, gaze into the sky and look very heroic. On the one hand, as Marian Bakker argues,[5] Babushkina sketches the post-Communist era in her country in a humorous way. On the other hand, her statement is unmistakable: the future belongs to the lesbians.

What about the Slovenian reactions to the exhibition? As in the case of the Krista Beinstein exhibition in the mid-1980s, the Slovenian responses to 'Lesbian ConneXion/s' were quite extreme and emotional: the visitors were perhaps not so shocked as in the days of 'Obscene Women', but much more intolerant, and the lesbians themselves were very critical, but also much more outspoken this time – as one can see from the statements in the visitors' book. Straight visitors wrote insulting comments saying lesbians were sick, ugly and abnormal, although some still thought that the photos were of a high quality. Some lesbians stated that they did not recognize themselves in the photos, which made them angry. What one visitor, Petra, wrote in the visitors' book at the Ghent exhibition covers a lot of Slovenian lesbians' reactions as well:

> I regret to say that only few of the photos have my approval. . . . I see women who impersonate themselves as men. What about femininity, tenderness and the softness of two women making love? I do not see this in the pictures. Most of them reflect the harshness and identity crises the models apparently go through. To me, a woman stays a woman.[6]

At the discussion which took place during the City of Women festival some lesbians expressed their disappointment with the photographs, because they felt that they did not represent 'the ordinary lives of lesbians', even though everybody had trouble explaining what 'the ordinary life of an ordinary lesbian' is. I think that the reason for these negative reactions can be found in the very few positive images and models of identification which are available for lesbians in everyday life in Slovenian society, where the mass media for years have ignored lesbians or presented them in stereotypical fashions.

The first images, which accompanied articles on lesbianism or interviews with lesbian activists in the straight press from 1987, were extremely romanticized and popular photographs (usually by unknown and unnamed photographers!) of two women with long hair, usually of the same colour, gently hugging and looking at each other, portrayed as twins or clones, and most importantly as totally asexual. Of course, these sterile photographs (or drawings), based on a depersonalized aesthetic, emphasized above all the emotional, non-sexual dimensions of a lesbian relationship and had nothing to do with those pictures which circulated in the lesbian subculture, or which were shown in the bulletin *Lesbozine*.[7] The lesbian newsletters used photographs from the international lesbian press and pictures taken by lesbian photographers worldwide, and they also published some popular 'lesbian' photos by Man Ray. Among the photos shown in the lesbian newsletters were pictures of foreign lesbian activists, of lesbian meetings and/or conferences, of important lesbian artists (for example Adrienne Rich, Djuna Barnes, Gertrude Stein, Ethel Smyth and many others), of early lesbian butch/femme culture in Berlin

in the 1920s, etc. Those photographs that try to show a 'real' lesbian existence/culture and lesbians with names were in strong contrast to the visual images of the depersonalized clones of the mainstream press. One could say that the photographs published in the early lesbian newsletter *Lesbozine* had the function of documentary photography, presenting lesbian women of 'flesh and blood', with long and short hair, and wearing different clothes, just simply looking different.

So there were pictures of lesbians in circulation other than the sterile ones of the straight press. But these more radical and different images of lesbians and lesbian relationships were obviously in no way interesting or comforting for a broad public, so they never appeared outside the lesbian newletters. The mainstream media maintained the dream image of two gentle souls in a sophisticated embrace, cleansed of all feminist, political and sexual meaning. The erotic press and the very popular Yugoslav magazine *Erotika* were to a certain extent exceptions. When writing or introducing lesbianism, articles in *Erotika* did try to describe sexual activities of lesbians. But the photos which accompanied the articles presented extremely (hetero)sexual images of always half-naked women with long hair, sexy underwear, high heels and long nails. They avoided any kind of difference, lesbian role playing or similar. Sometimes on the very edge of pornographic photos, these erotic photos were in no way different from other images of women in the magazine *Erotika*, and, basically, these more 'erotic' images of lesbians sent quite the same message as the images of asexual lesbian clones. Both types of representations spoke in favour of a harmless, easy, not so disturbing same-sex orientation of a 'gentle sex'.

Added to these sterile depictions of lesbians in the mainstream press, I also want to mention that – due to the homophobia in the country – most Slovenian lesbian activists did not appear in public in photos of themselves, and they have also often been very reluctant to appear on television. This may also have contributed to obscuring the issue of lesbianism and the image of lesbians.

Contrary to the images shown in the mainstream press, 'Lesbian ConneXion/s' takes the visitors on a voyage of discovery which sometimes may be unpleasant or troubled. This is, for example, the case when photographs of gender-benders are shown, such as those of the photographer Del LaGrace Volcano (Great Britain) who takes hormones and calls himself a hermafrodyke.[8] The male/female role is taken a step further by women who have chosen to be neither man nor woman. But those nonstereotyped images of gender are not very known or embraced by Slovenian (lesbian) culture and they may raise fears in lesbians that they would be once again stigmatized as sick or abnormal by the dominant culture. That could also be partly the reason for some women to neglect gender-bending as a part of everyday life or as a legitimate answer to the question 'What do lesbians look like?'

All this may explain the aforementioned negative responses from Slovenian lesbians to 'Lesbian ConneXion/s'. However, for my own part, I see 'Lesbian ConneXion/s' as an exhibition which by its nomadism presents lesbian images as a constant movement, conflation, reinterpretation, invention – and thus as a step forward. I think the exhibition gives us images of a decentred culture like the one which also grows in the new cultural centres in Slovenia such as the Metelkova City.[10]

NOTES

1. Once part of Yugoslavia, Slovenia became an autonomous and independent democratic republic in January 1992.
2. See the catalogue for the exhibition (Bakker, 2000).
3. Exhibition catalogue, photo No.1.
4. Exhibition catalogue, photo No. 26.
5. Exhibition catalogue, photo No. 28.
6. Exhibition catalogue, last page.
7. See *Lesbozine* (No.1, 1988), published by SKUC -Sekcija LL, Ljubljana.
8. Exhibition catalogue, photo No. 20, self-portrait by Del LaGrace Volcano.
9. The City of Women festival takes place in Ljubljana every October.
10. The Metelkova City in Ljubljana, former barracks of the Yugoslav People's Army in Metelkova Street, and since September 1993, when many independent groups and individuals took over military barracks, a cultural centre for many non-governmental organizations and clubs (including lesbian and gay and women's groups), artists, exhibitions, workshops, performances, concerts, etc.

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