

in conversation with Lea Kukovičič, the artist who auctioned a theatre performance

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BE THERE AT THE DAWN OF NEW ECONOMY.

OWN WHAT HAS NEVER BEEN OWNED BEFORE.

TEACH NEOLIBERALISM A LESSON.

INVENT THE FUTURE OF EPHEMERAL ECONOMY.

INVEST IN A NEW LEGACY.

BUY THEATER NOW!!!

This was written on billboards in the city of Ljubljana as an advertisement for the project FORSALE, a performance auction house, established by the artist Lea Kukovičič in 2021. The common understanding – „Theatre is useless, it does not produce a neoliberal wish to spend“ – was the starting point of her project, in which she intervened theatre with economy.

A couple of weeks ago, I attended her artist talk at Kunstraum Innsbruck, which followed the performance „Ich kann nicht anders“ by Slovenian collective [Beton Ltd.](#) In her presentation, Lea explained to the audience, how she sold a theatre performance (namely the one we just experienced) as the first auction house in the world and which consequences came with it. Certain elements of the performance „Ich kann nicht anders“ are now owned by individuals and collectives who bought them during the theatrically performed – but very real – auction at last year’s edition of [Mladi Levi – performing arts festival](#) in Slovenia.



Artist Talk by Lea Kukovičič at Kunstraum Innsbruck | photo: Daniel Jarosch

As if the philosophically and emotionally demanding performance by Beton Ltd. wasn't enough for our brains, Lea's artist talk, in which she explained her original project FORSALE to the audience, left some listeners in even greater confusion. Opening up a meta-level, stating the fact that our world was mainly based on fiction and that we were constantly surrounded by theatre in our daily lives, Lea even evoked doubts on the „realness“ of her project she was just describing in her performative artist talk. At the end, she finished her presentation with the comment that there wasn't room for Q&A, since she had already explained everything she could. Nevertheless, some visitors, including myself, took the chance to speak to her and to members of Beton Ltd. afterwards, in order to ask some burning questions and to get some mysteries solved...

komplex: Lea, you opened your talk with a quote by Aristotle on fiction, referring to a global “crisis of fiction” that we are facing at the moment. What does fiction mean to you and how is it linked to the neoliberal art market?

Lea Kukovičič: With all my performances, I have always wanted to make the point that theatre performance is not in any way different than reality. I was almost getting angry that I do not have the means to explain this, but then I understood: everything is fiction. Its man-made stories and discourses – the narratives we live by. Fiction is everything and everywhere around us. It is not solemnly reserved for the stage, books, movies. In this moment, the greatest fiction of all is money. A piece of paper that performs money, it is a useful fiction that became a necessity for us. We believe in it, therefore we need it. The neoliberal art market is a fiction of buying and selling, creating value and demand. The opening quote I borrowed from Aristotle underlines the complex, yet simple relationship to fiction. We think, fiction is fake, because we activate even more rationality when watching it, as when experiencing “reality”. While reality does not need any rationality, it simply exists. By positioning an auction house inside of the theatre realm, we had the possibility to see in detail what kind of fiction the art market is and what kind of behavior it produces. As any other reality, it is constructed.

What distinguishes visual art from performance art when it comes to their economic value?

The greatest distinction is that theatre is not as popular as pop music or visual art, and that it is useless for the neoliberal system, as it does not provide a neoliberal desire for spending money. Which is paradox, as there is theatre absolutely everywhere in our daily lives. This is obvious. The most invisible distinction is in the amount of labor. Performance is a constant work, it's not like visual art, where a painting can exist in the space without the artist coming to the gallery each day. In theatre, you need to be there every single time in order for the performance to exist, and not just the artists, but the whole machinery of the theatre. It's days and nights and nights and days of visible and invisible labour. I can't tell any numbers regarding its economic value, as there are no calculations done for theatre, but if we look at calculations for visual arts, we are talking about billions.

Why did you choose the performance „Ich kann nicht anders“ by Slovenian collective [Beton Ltd.](#) to be sold in your auction house project?

There are many reasons, some are rational, some relational, some intuitive. It is an iconic performance of the Slovenian theatre scene, and it is a very very good show! The performance created in 2016 by theatre collective Beton Ltd. tackles similar topics as FORSALE, but in a very different fashion. „Ich kann nicht anders“ is a performance that places the audience in a voyeuristic position and lets them enter the lives of three artists that find themselves inside of a bunker. The position of the audience in FORSALE is exactly the same. The audience is caught in the middle of the artwork and in the brutal neoliberal power of the auction. Some audience members would participate in the auction, others would just witness the action. Then, „Ich kann nicht anders“ is pointing towards the responsibility of human actions. FORSALE does similar, it gives audience members two possibilities: are you going to buy it and take care of it (which is ironic and real at the same time) or are you going to rebel against the capitalistic system and let it have its own life, which could also mean death? And not to mention the real drama of the performance which happens in the relationship to the outside world – being afraid of the historical changes, performers are talking about food, movies and other people, as well as about ungraspable

everyday matters: capitalism, destruction, patriarchy. We were basically auctioning the critique of what we were producing. On a narrative level.

How is the question of responsibility of actions in „Ich kann nicht anders“ linked to your project FORSALE?

One of the topics we tackle with FORSALE is understanding of ownership. Ownership, as we experience it today, comes only with rights, but not with responsibility. We challenged that by creating new legal contracts of ownership: a contract that comes with rights and responsibilities for the bought lots. For example, you as an owner can use the lots in any context you want, but whenever the performance is being performed again, you need to deliver it to the venue of the performance a few days before. If you don't, you are facing financial penalties. You are not allowed to change or damage the lots, they need to come back in the original state. Usually, when I explain our concept of ownership to people, they make angry comments such as: this is not ownership, it is borrowing. Which is a completely wrong understanding of ownership, because to own is not to destroy. The ownership we are proposing is connected to love, care and nurturing. It is not ownership that is abusive and destructive. To own is to carry, to feed – think of owning a dog. With becoming an owner of the specific lot, you also enter a system of collective ownership: all of the new owners, together with the producers and artists, are responsible for the future of the performance „Ich kann nicht anders“. The lots can be re-sold or inherited, but also the new owners need to sign the same contract with the same rights and responsibilities.



FORSALE – during the auction | photo: Nada Žgank

“Auction is a real drama” – Can you describe how the auction was carried out?

As a theatre director it is my job to create drama. Yet, I will never be as good in creating drama as an auctioneer. His main tool is a gavel – an object that makes things unchangeable and irreversible. When the hammer falls, the reality changes. This fact is exciting and scary as it works towards a very specific goal. It is a perfect dramaturgical structure. We all know what it means to buy and to sell. We all know what it means if things are not sold. We all know what it means if somebody becomes an owner. We all have the knowledge, so we can relate to this drama, even if we have never experienced the auction before. Auction houses have special rooms to conduct sale- sales rooms. As we did it in the theatre, we transformed the place of the theatre into a posh and a sleek auction house with its own gala entrance, reception staff (that performed an auction register procedure and informed audience with the protocol of the auction and with auction paddles) and a repetitive video in the foyer in which the CEO (Alma R. Selimović) of the auction house presented the vision and mission statement of FORSALE. The auction of the theatre performance was never done before, therefore we needed to invent and design a new auction model. In the venue, there were two stages – one for the performance „Ich kann nicht anders“, towards which the audience members were facing and one at the audience member’s backs, where the auctioneer and the whole machine of the auction took place. The performance was performed without a break and it was hijacked by: projecting information about the items for sale(lots) at the scenography of the performance, with brutal intervention of auction and also by expert’s (Janez Janša) interventions, whom we invited to deliver live commentary during the show, to prove that lots have value. This was the structure of the event, emotionally, it was much more complex.

Which elements of the performance were being sold in the auction? Who bought them and at what price?

First, we thought of selling the whole performance, but then we got excited about collective ownership and we dismantled the 75-minute performance into 9 lots. We made this gesture in order to show that it is not really possible to dismantle the theatre performance and that the performance cannot exist unless all the elements are there. This is a critique and a lesson for capitalism. We dissected the performance into material elements: Props, Scenography, Costumes. And ephemeral lots: Silences, Time, Tableau Vivant, Events, Collectiveness and Text. We made a detailed documentation of each individual lot which was presented in the catalogue. Six out of nine lots were sold at the live auction. The props were bought after a dramatic outbid by a painter belonging to the *Neue Slowenische Kunst* movement, Roman Uranjek, for 320 EUR. The costumes belong to the academic professor and art collector Tanja Črnič Oblak, and were hers for 750 EUR. Silences were bought (by mistake) by the independent visual designer Damjan Ilić for 1,125 EUR. Times belong to the contemporary art collective *Balkan Express*, they invested 1,250 EUR. Tableau Vivant was bought by an anonymous owner for 1,875 EUR. And the last, Text – all the words from the performance, including words which violate copyright laws – belongs to the city theatre *Prešeren Theatre Kranj* which bought it for their festival *The Week of Slovenian Drama* for the amount of 2,500 EUR. We did not reach any of the estimate values, just a bit above the starting bids, but we were shocked that we sold anything at all.

How did you estimate the value of the performance elements and why did “collectiveness” (which did not get sold in the end) have the highest value?

Determining the value of the specific lots was a durational process that took us around three months. This was the first thing we needed to invent – the model for appraisal of theatre performance. The first meeting, where all of the parties got together (theatre collective Beton Ltd., production house Bunker and me/FORSALE) we titled „Value party“. At the VP we wrote down all the visible and invisible labour that needed to happen in order for the performance to exist (up until the premiere) and all the work that has to be done every single time for the performance to happen over and over again. In order to be able to propose the valuable elements, I watched the performance (on video) 16 times. To determine the starting price and estimated value for each lot, we took criteria of ephemerality and the human investment in it. Ephemeral lots we valued more expensive than material lots. Collectiveness is the core of the performance. It's not just time, not just labor, but emotion – a common experience that created referential points and mutual responses. This is why Collectiveness got the highest estimated value (from 20,000 EUR–21,500 EUR) of all lots. Its starting bid was 5,000 EUR which makes 25 percent of its estimated value.



FORSALE / „Ich kann nicht anders“ – during the auction | photo: Nada Žgank

You mentioned that after your auction you were shocked about its success – why? what was the scary part of it?

I wanted to understand what we are talking about, when we are talking about a neoliberal system and I went into it and appropriated one. And then Bamb! The answers came. My first shock came from the fact that we managed to evoke the desire in six buyers to invest their money in theatre and become part of a collective ownership. It is partly unknown how we did it. The second shock was that we had been rehearsing all the aspects of it for one year and after the auction happened, it took control over us and became a living organism on its

own. We entered the reality in which every word counts, and everything is taken literally. So, anything we wrote in a catalogue as literature, it jumped out of the pages as a fact after the auction. And if there was something written slightly wrong, we would be in big trouble – and we ended in one big trouble. Since the beginning of the auction we had been sensing we were going into the heart of darkness. The darkness still shocks.

What real consequences does the auction have for the collective Beton Ltd.?

During the process, there were a lot of different types of consequences for Beton Ltd. When we started working on the auction, there was not much knowledge, as there has never been a performance auctioned before. Beton Ltd. entered the unknown and we together created a new knowledge. The collective collaborated on the whole concept with me, from the start to the finish line. So, the level of danger and consequences for them was high from the beginning. On the practical level, now, after the auction, the producer of the performance informs all the new owners of the next performance one month upfront, so that they find consent and bring back the objects, if needed. Therefore, there is constant uncertainty if a performance will happen, if everyone will allow it or there is somebody who won't allow the use of one of the lots. In this case, Beton Ltd. would need to use a duplicate of the lot for their performance. For me, they are a bit like heroes, because I do not know any other collective that would be able and willing to pull it off. Imagine all the emotional stress of selling 'your baby – your collectiveness, your relations, your silences, your words. And not to mention that they managed to perform „Ich kann nicht anders“ without stopping while there was the auction happening at the same time. There should be a book written on the emotional burden they had to endure.

The historical first auction of a theater performance was held in Slovenia, a post socialist society – does this fact have an influence on your project?

A big one for the auction outcome. Post socialistic Slovenia was the perfect place to conduct our first auction. People are intelligent, they have a sense of humor, but they also have money. Some. Some do not have money, but we knew that the audience members will be split into two parts: the buyers and the witnesses. It was important for us to let all types of audience be present at the auction. Not just people with the money. I did not only create an auction, but an art project, therefore, I was interested in the smoke after the auction. Some audience members responded with confusion, some were pissed off, some loved the idea. There were also critics who marked it as the worst artwork of the year, because they did not really understand if it was a joke or we meant it seriously, and because they did not know the ideological aspect of it, they decided to mark it as the most terrible. Well, it is terrible. The auction part. Yet, as mentioned before, FORSALE is a project, a complex system, as it is an auction, but also a performance. It is a performance inside of the performance of a performance. It produced a lot of discussions – not always discussions about the neoliberal system and capitalism, but also some more petit-bourgeoisie debates on what is a wrong way to do theatre and what is right. And if this was art or if it was not.



FORSALE-billboards in Ljubljana | photo: Urska Boljkovac

FORSALE happened during [Mladi Levi Festival](#) in Ljubljana – did it reach also international response?

Even though this was the original aim and we also did some international PR, we did not have enough money to actually hire a PR company or an international PR expert to make it happen for us. We also thought that the presence at the festival will help gain an international response, but in the tricky years for traveling, it did not. Strategically speaking, the artist talks helps FORSALE to gain more international recognition.

At the end of your talk you were apologizing to the collective for selling their performance. How do you feel about your project? Would you do it again?

After the auction, all the questions were answered, the unknown became the known. The morning after the auction, still a bit hungover, was the first moment in which I could take full responsibility for the project. As this project is not about care or theatre – we messed with the economy – it's beyond care. All my pain came from hurting Beton Ltd. I placed them in a position in which human beings should never be in. Human beings should not be economised. However, in reality, we are all in this position, constantly economised. And yes, if you ask me, if I would do it again, the answer is: most probably, yes. We did it, we know it is hell, but we want to do it again. In the catastrophe, there is rage, there is pain, but there is also love. Do I believe other times will be easier? No. But now I do have the knowledge and I can tell my new collaborators from the start, how it will feel and what will happen. And also it brought joy to the new owners, an excitement about the future of an old theatre performance.

The performance festival [Mladi Levi](#) is taking place this year from August 19th-27th in Ljubljana.

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Link to the article: <https://komplex-kulturmagazin.com/2022/07/26/lea-kukovicic-the-artist-who-auctioned-the-first-theater-performance-in-the-world/>