

Phone interview with Nina Czegledy

New media artist, curator and theorist from Canada, whose projects often have a strong link to Eastern Europe, about the importance of “pragmatic dreams”

ALAIN KESSI

When we call her, Nina is in Tirana holding a digital story-telling workshop under the title *Windows and Curtains* with women of the Cultural Center Lindart <http://www.lindart.org/project_info/projekte02/index.html>. We got to know Nina years ago through her series of video production events *Crossing Over* <<http://www.ljudmila.org/co>>.

What is the situation in Tirana? It's difficult, I understand from your e-mail. You don't have electricity part of the time.

Well, I think that – first of all, hello everybody! – I think that it is not something that is just a temporary difficulty. In Tirana, it's generally about two hours, but the rest of Albania has several more hours of power... not having power, daily, so everybody has to kind of organize their life around when is power, when is not power, and some of the shops have generators in order to maintain electricity throughout the day. But I think it is a thing which people try to live with and try to make the best of it here.

Has this been going on for a long time, or is this...

It has been going on. I was here a little over a year ago and it was... actually, then it was even worse in Tirana in terms of electricity.

Yes. You mentioned that you are in Tirana for a workshop. Can you tell us more about it?

Well, we are doing a workshop about digital storytelling, with young women artists. These are actually students in the Art Academy in the last year, and while they are quite well informed about many issues and they are very creative people, they didn't have any access, or very little access, to technology and computers.

So, consequently, we are trying to do a very basic workshop on digital storytelling, local stories, their own stories, through text and still images, which to incorporate into our collaborative Web site.

What topics are you working on?

We have a theme for this workshop, and the theme is windows and curtains. And this is a metaphor for the windows and curtains in the everyday life and the general life of Albanians and the people of Tirana.

What is your impression of the political situation in Tirana? You know several countries of Eastern Europe, of the former Eastern Bloc quite well, so you have some comparison. How would you situate the development of the situation over the years in Albania?

I have very little exact details about the political landscape here, because what I see is mostly what I see on the street and talking to people, and what I do see is the economic changes, and I see a tremendous building fever, there is construction all over the place, and the city has a mayor here called Edi Rama, and Edi Rama is actually an artist by education and origin, and he has done a number of things which many people welcome, because he decided to clean up the river which is flowing through here, and tries to green the city, and tries to get rid of some of the small shacks, which were selling, you know, fast food, and Coca Cola, and so forth, in order to get a city into a more presentable and more esthetically pleasing way.

You would say that there is hope around, when you speak to people? They see a future?

Definitely, I mean those people who are in my workshop are young women in their early twenties, and they are very positive. They would like to enter the workforce as soon as they graduate, and they already have jobs, and through their graphic design, they are able to get jobs in advertisement, and print publication, and they do hope that they can continue this.

Can you describe the space you are in?

I am staying with a very lovely landlady, who has a few rooms she rents, and this is a very clean, very nice house. On the other hand, you cannot enter it from the main street, you have to go in to back alley, and then surprisingly, there is a garden, and behind the garden there is this nice, clean house. And this is where I'm staying. And where I'm working is Lindart, and Lindart is actually a Pro Helvetia project.

Oh, Pro Helvetia seems to be very busy in Eastern Europe currently.

It definitely is, and so, Pro Helvetia is... has been for the last two years providing operating funds to this very unique organization, which is generally focusing on women artists and not just arts, but also social activism, and through art often, and it's very unusual and unique here, to have projects of this nature. So Elen Laperi, who is the director of this, she's a very outstanding pioneering woman in my eyes, and they already have organized a major exhibition of women artists from the Balkans. And they are working on other international projects that they want to bring in. Artists not only from the Balkans, but internationally.

You are quite mobile, you travel a lot.

Yes, I just came back from China and Japan... and so forth, yes I am very happy that I can work in many places, it's a big fortune in my life.

What do you work on at the moment?

I am working on my own work, which has to do with electromagnetism, and it's a collaborative project about using the Aurora Borealis, that Northern Light, as a metaphor, and I also curate some exhibitions, and touring projects. Most of these start from Canada, because that's where I am able to get some steep funding, and also a lot of support. So I am working now on a touring exhibition between Canada, New Zealand and Australia, which is supposed to open in February.

What is your incentive for doing this kind of work?

Because I firmly believe that despite of artists' e-mail and online communication, physical presence once in a while is very important, and we have to do our best to bridge across cultures.

And more generally, what position does work take in your life?

That's my major reason for my existence, because my work and my private life totally intertwined with each other. I work with my friends, and my... it's just the same thing, actually.

Yes. And so what would be the dreams of your life, and in what context could you realize those?

Well, because I'm independent, I don't have to follow institutional policies, consequently I generally dream up a concept, and I share it with some people, and together with people like I was at CFront with you, or when I am working with Iliyana Nedkova, and on Crossing Over, or when I am working with others, because I couldn't do anything if it wouldn't be for all these other people. Anyway, so we dream up something, and every body says, this is impossible, you cannot do it... and then we do it.

That sounds really good...

I am an optimist.

So you think that the dreams you have, you do realize them.

I am a pragmatic dreamer, you know. So most of these dreams can be realized. It's a question of time and money. And somehow I try to get some money.

Are there moments when you do not work? We hear that you have a house South of the Alps, in Northern Italy. Do you go there to work, or do you do something else there?

I go there to read.

To eat?

To read and eat and drink.

To read and eat and drink...?

But I go very seldom. It's rented out, because otherwise I couldn't keep it. So I go there every year once.