

MATERIALS

This exhibition of new works and its accompanying program is about taking care and social interweaving. All the works on display are based on photos that I've taken on the street of patched up broken homes and car parts. The process of weaving by myself became a way to relate to the collaborations that I take part in. Therefore I've asked members of my reading group to co-write this text with me. Our group is called 'Knowledge Is a Does' (KIAD). We formed at the Jan van Eyck Academy in 2014. Soon into our conversations for this project, we decided to involve another group, Open Kamensko. We devised a textual pattern where each of our group's participating members wrote a response to a sentence in the letter we received from Open Kamensko.¹

KAMENSKO

The textile factory Kamensko was one of many companies established during the industrial boom in communist Yugoslavia, right after the end of World War II. After the break-up, just like most state-owned companies, Kamensko went through a process of privatization. The internationally renowned textile factory in Zagreb was best known for its production of men's suits although of course the vast majority of the factory workers were women. After the break-up of Yugoslavia, just like most state-owned companies, Kamensko went through a process of privatization. The main stockholders established new executive and supervisory boards and the workers got the chance to buy shares, which they were then advised to sell later at below market rate. The people who now owned Kamensko were only interested in its real estate; continuing production was not to their advantage. So the company's management started downscaling by firing workers.

In 2009, the workers' salaries began to arrive late. By 2010 the situation had worsened still - the employees hadn't been paid for six months, to which they protested by going on a ten-day hunger strike. The union didn't help them, but they did gain broad public support. Together with students and local NGOs the workers organized protest marches throughout the city centre, demanding that the factory officially declare bankruptcy. This finally happened in October 2010 when the production line was stopped. Approximately 400 workers lost their jobs, 80% of which were women aged 50 or older, who have minimal opportunities for future work on the labor market.

Earlier this year a private construction company bought the real estate of the former factory, which is situated in an attractive location in the city centre overlooking a park, for a much lower price than the estimated value. Although the debt of the company - including the workers' unpaid salaries, contributions and taxes - has risen to approximately €11 million, the sale of the real estate raised hopes among the former factory workers that they would finally be reimbursed years of unpaid salaries and contributions.²

OPEN KAMENSKO

In 2011, a number of female workers from Kamensko established the association 'Open Kamensko'. First and foremost, the association was a place of collective action and mutual support during an existential crisis. The City of Zagreb granted the women a workshop space where they started working again on new equipment that they acquired via donations. They sew and repair clothes, give training in sewing and tailoring, and organize creative workshops, as well as working in cooperation with local designers and often doing commissioned work for humanitarian donations.

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Dear Knowledge Is a Does,

*After 7 unpaid wages and severance pay, and after 426 of us ended on the street, we had two options, to surrender or to fight to change that bad. We decided to fight. Why should we bow our heads? Our sin was that we were fair. **We gathered and formed the association Open Kamensko with the conscious aim to fight for our claims via the association; to be present in the media in order not to be forgotten.***
(see KIAD 4 — Kym Ward)

KIAD 1 — Hana Miletić

I was a bit nervous about getting in touch with Open Kamensko. I've been following their story in the press with a lot of attention the last few years. The story intrigues me because it makes real the transition that the country I was born in—and had to leave already as a child—has made in the last few decades: a brutal change from a socialist governing and reasoning principle to a neoliberal one. Moreover, the former factory workers—today self-organised, freelance textile workers—embody how this transition has affected women's lives. So I was very happy when Open Kamensko's spokeswoman Đurđa Grozaj agreed to pose our questions to the women of her group, although it's unclear whether the response represents a singular or collective voice.

I have to be honest. My interest in Open Kamensko is completely biased. After several collaborations with minority groups I have been left with thoughts about how to align better lines of fight, how to change in compassion for solidarity. I was hoping that after meeting Open Kamensko we would gain knowledge about new organisational and working models in class and gender struggles. Therefore I was particularly struck by this sentence in Đurđa's response to us about competitive deals within the current textile industry, about bigger and better machines. This brought to mind the many news articles that I had read in the last six years about how the Kamensko ladies guarded their machines right until the day that the factory went bankrupt and closed its doors. As Ellen has pointed out in our email conversation there seems to be this continual collapse in the female workers' statements between themselves—as subjects and as bodies—and the

materials of their labor.

A recent reading of Wendy Brown's book *Undoing the Demos* made me think about the importance of infrastructure in all of this. In our reading group we read together Michel Feher's text on human capital which led me towards Brown's work. Both Brown and Feher write that in neoliberalism all human beings are market actors, every field of activity is seen as a market, and every entity—whether public or private, whether person, business, or state—is governed as a firm.

Đurđa's mention of better and bigger machines makes visible her belief in the importance of productivity growth. First of all, why is she so attached to the physical aspect of producing textile, which was evidenced by the workers' protection of the machines as Karisa has pointed out, when that form of work isn't paying her group anymore? Secondly, I feel the need to warn Đurđa about the current trends to favour to aggregate human capabilities above physical assets that produce goods and services. And finally, I'm left wondering if privatisation has systematically dismantled public infrastructure, exactly like in the case of the Kamensko textile factory, and in consequence has produced new forms of responsabilization—what then is the importance of who has the better and bigger machines? I'll try to say it again and in other words. If nowadays, social infrastructure is at the same time taken away from you and you're asked to become this invisible infrastructure, particularly in the case of us women, do you need better and bigger machines to do so, to be responsible, to take care and to be together?

OPEN KAMENSKO

We were aware of the fact that in our country you need to wait for years to have your voice heard, and that we do not want to be beggars like the society imposed on us, so we started our program for survival. At the beginning we didn't have anything, not even a broken needle. We could only dream about a sewing machine. (see KIAD 3 — Karisa Senavitis)

So we had nothing other than the desire and the perspective that we will work, create and never give up. Of course from the beginning we based ourselves on the needle, the thread and a piece of cloth. (see KIAD 2 — EC Feiss)

KIAD 2 — EC Feiss

I was struck by this phrase the first time I read it for two reasons. The first has been mentioned elsewhere: the women of Open Kamensko repeatedly conflate themselves—as bodies and as beings—with the machines and accouterments of their work. This is an instance of what Brown and Feher describe³: that subjects of neoliberalism are permeated by the market; they come to produce its logics nearly totally—psychically, as well as, emotionally. Open Kamensko's attachment is so extreme though, that it seems metaphorical or otherwise aesthetic. Astoundingly, it is purely literal, even though “basing yourself on the needle” seems a narrative device.

Simultaneously, and this is my second point, this image is incredibly violent. I immediately processed “basing” as impaling oneself on the needle. Sacrificing the body in labor. I think of all the industrial machines that have swallowed people or ripped their limbs off. Such violence indicates the stakes of their fight. Rather than being as straightforward as this however, the violence directed against them is the destruction of their means of survival. The phrase then has a fraught relation to its aesthetic status, because of these material implications. It is not only that Open Kamensko bases themselves on the needle as a euphemism for commitment to a way of life, or anything else that might conjure, but that their struggle is based in the tools and processes of labor. They don't exist as a group outside of this work.

To return to the rest, “the thread and a piece of cloth,” we might read the sentence as: needle (tool) thread (material) piece of cloth (commodity). Open Kamensko base themselves not only on the needle, but also on the chain of events in the production of a commodity. Their intrapersonal collapse into the materials and process of labor is exactly what Feher urges “human capital” to do, in the absence of the factory and the figure of the industrial labourer with which collective power was once forged.

Open Kamensko thus are a worker's movement adapting to Feher's vision, as their workplace and the context of manual labor was taken away from them. They know, just as Feher knows, that the expulsion of the machine and the factory equals a removal of collective power. In turn, we watch Open Kamensko adapt to Feher's vision, making their work and the materials of their work one with their physical and interior selves. And importantly, struggling in the name of this attachment.

Hana has made textile for this exhibition. A work of mourning for a lost collective (not us, another one.) Like Open Kamensko then, we have come together because of “a piece of cloth.” Does this mean we should also take on Feher's decree? We are separated from each other now because of our status as ‘cognitive’ workers. In the absence of the grounded site of work, we move where we must. In this sense, Open Kamensko's closer connection to an actual factory arguably enabled what militancy they convert to the terms of human capital. Could we try to do this, following them? What is the relation of manual to cognitive labor, in terms of tactical correspondence? Or what is the potential for us to learn to organize from them? There is of course much written on this, and our group can follow it up, albeit remotely. I wonder if our questions about solidarity with Open Kamensko—that we discussed as we organized this, wringing our hands at its seeming impossibility— are more so about our own group. How to strengthen it despite the loss of our shared workplace? How to keep our experience as a collective close?

What our two groups (Open Kamensko and KIAD) enable one to see, is that this poisonous attachment to labor also produces a strong

collectivity that creates a space that comes from, but exceeds, those involved. Feher hopes for collective power—and its inevitable emotional attachment—from as of yet, unorganised workers. We are those. Our labor, where we met and collectivized, was so remote. Our labor was symbolic, in relation to cultural funding paradigms. Each of us represented a target form of production. We organized in open secrecy, mostly outside the building where we were meant to be. We were partly rewarded for our collaborations, sometimes aggressed. This is an image of how we compromised, like Open Kamensko, with the terms of the extraction of our labor. We have perhaps tried to figure out the parameters of this compromise here.

OPEN KAMENSKO

That's what we know best, that's our life. To our program we added education, fitting and altering. We sewed everything from tents to evening gowns, from bags to suits. We organized our own fashion shows called Equally Beautiful which included people from public life. The housewife, politicians, big and small artists all walked our runway, and they were all equally beautiful. We cooperate with many well-known designers from Croatia, Germany, Milan and the region. We are specially pleased to collaborate with young designers who are just starting, who don't have experience but have huge talent. These types of collaborations are a great motivation to us. Their knowledge and our experience, a perfect combination.

*A big motivation are also our MEPS. With M. Tonino Picula e.g.; we did a project for children's homes, for which we sewed tracksuits and pyjamas. For Mrs. Dubravka Šuica we sewed bathrobes and bed linen for the Vukovar and Dubrovnik hospital projects. **These kinds of projects mean a great deal to us because usually such projects are always given to those who are very well equipped with better and bigger machines than ours.** (see KIAD 1 — Hana Miletić)*

KIAD 3 — Karisa Senavitis

The broken needle is what I would like to take up as a symbol of repair. A needle is already a repairing tool: to stitch together, to thread, to hem, to mend. But when technologies of repair need mending themselves, what then? It is the gendered and reproductive labor of repair and maintenance that is so often the collective work of women, manifested in all sorts of technologies and circumstances. The factory is broken and so the women are woven ever tighter together in their struggle. This tension no doubt broke some threads. Not all workers could align with the structure of Open Kamensko. There are probably lots of knots and tangles. As a collective their woven pattern might look nice from the front but there's probably a lot we could learn if we flipped it around.

It was that way with the first rug I wove, but my instructor advised that I go slow, drink tea. It is good advice for weavers, collectives, and repair work. It's an endless maintenance to keep things connected. We drank tea together as a reading group. And I try to have a cup when we skype. Working remotely has brought us to cyber networked configuration.

We are brought together by Hana's work to keep us communicating. The labour of our writing has expanded. We've had many skypes and emails and notes passed along the pirate pad. We've read several texts and considered more. One could forget that it is a labor because we are doing the work perhaps foremost to stay in touch. To mend the divide of time zones and borders. I was thinking of the broken needle and the time when our skype connection was not very good. One could hear and read but not type, one could see but not hear anything, and so on. And the ways we tried to recover and continue our conversation made it somehow more urgent and unguarded. It was fragmentary and maybe silly but it put me in touch with the love I have for you. It seemed to surface that feeling for all of us. Our technology had broken and in the act of repair our feeling of connection was restored.

I don't have a lot of tearful skypes. So while I had thought I'd get into my critical design research here regarding industries of care as it pertains to collectives of repair—maybe these little personal tangents offer something akin to our process of repairing a broken group. Our patterns of reading and meeting had stopped over a year ago. To pick up those threads, to go back to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's reparative writings but then find the Sadie Plant text offered so much... and to relate them back to Hana's weavings of repairs and the wikipedia edit-athon... so much of what is happening for *Materials* involves collectives of women in the practice of repair for each other. As Anni Albers wrote in *On Weaving*: "Material form becomes meaningful form through design, that is, through considered relationships. And this meaningful form can become the carrier of a meaning that takes us beyond what we think of as immediate reality."

OPEN KAMENSKO

These projects give us the opportunity to show that our team can do more quality and better even on donated machines just because we know how to. We are grateful to these people for such projects because they allow us to pay our monthly salaries and cover all the costs which are not little.

In our workshop in the neighbourhood Knežija we have eight employees and in our second workshop in IKEA we have an additional two employees. Soon we will hire two more employees. Four colleagues have retired with their heads lifted from the Kamensko association. In the former factory we received a camp-like treatment with a very high work norm standard. You always had to keep your head down. If you protested you were threatened with dismissal. In the association Kamensko I made sure as long as I am responsible that we work like this: have a coffee, be relaxed and results will come much easier. It's very joyous in our workshop. We help each other, and all are equally important. I made possible that all these things that we could never do or have for ourselves we get now, like free massages, tickets for the theatre, opera, exhibitions and concerts.

Sincerely,

Open Kamensko

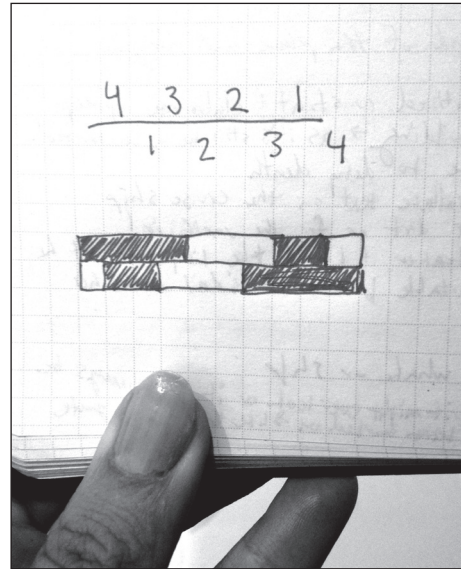
Being present in the media in order not to be forgotten needs unpacking, especially in our mediated affiliation with the struggle of former Kamensko employees for remuneration. The association bound the women together in direct local action and strives for nationwide media attention; spokeswoman-ship couches them in a language of fight and survival.

But online, we are able to approach the liminality of 'Open Kamensko' and understand patterns of adjustment for former, now non-associated, employees. Those who were past the age that labour prefers, those more weary and hungry and in need simply for books for their kids' education. And there, with our rough translations from Croatian, (trying to avoid using google) we can start to understand what collects us in sensual activities, what resonates in strategies for survival. And—lest this be called liberal techno-feminism—how we are dispersed by this platform: through lack of access to technology, through homogenisation of globalised communication. Hard and software bias that remains un-dismantled leaves us blackboxed. From Croatian media mogul Nino Pavić (who was managerially entangled in the fraud which led to Kamensko's closing), to divisive reportage on the worker's struggle between political solidarity and humanitarian compassion, to the bad press Open Kamensko now gets for receiving politically suspicious donations; media presence of the workers struggle is a feminist issue at the levels of visibility, voice and control along distribution networks.

The promises of cyberfeminism—that changing (online) relations of technology and society would dismantle patriarchal concepts of body, gender and sexuality, leading to greater social equality—have by now a techno-utopian bent. Still, the hope for cyberspace as the site of women's collective empowerment remains, as does the possibility for appropriation or critique of digital signification. Alongside terms parasitizing off biology, such as virus and carrier, weaving has come to have a specifically feminist history for oppositional cyborgs who embrace the jouissance of machinic, organic, reconstituted bodies.

In all honesty, for me, weaving calls to mind rounded school scissors and glue which ended up more in my hair and nose than sticking together the strips of pastel paper it should have. Reconstitution of a kind. And the last time I wove, it was bodily: at speed, dangerously, and through traffic. We need to be careful that weaving doesn't become an essential casting of 'female' experience, digital or otherwise; likewise that our desire for the fist-raised, fighting factory worker, (nostalgic for her emancipation) leads us to produce her digital likeness when the IRL politics are far more complicated. Still, we can empathise with the cruel optimism of attachment to a labour that doesn't support us, although hopefully along autonomous, virtually self-hosted networks. And when Open Kamensko gets flak for accepting

politically compromised donations, I find comfort in their ironing machine that doesn't straighten itself out. It's doubtful we need bigger and better machines to aid production and circulation. It's perhaps better to lovingly tend to a clunking machine that reveals it's politically imperfect mechanism.



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(Endnotes)

- 1 This is a collaborative text written by: Hana Miletić, E C Feiss, Karisa Senavitis, and Kym Ward
- 2 Andrea Milat, 'The revolt of the Kamensko workers and how to resist capitalism,' 2012, (<http://slobodnifilozofski.com/2012/09/andrea-milat-pobuna-radnica-kamenskog-i.html>) 'We were destroyed by capitalism!' Interview with anonymous worker from Kamensko and student Jelena Miloš, 2012, (<http://praksa.hr/kamensko/>)
- 3 Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*, Zone Books, 2015. Michel Feher, 'Self-Appreciation; or, The Aspirations of Human Capital,' *Public Culture*, vol 21, no 1, 2009

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For Material KIAD read:

- The Future Looms, Weaving Women and Cybernetics* by Sadie Plant, 1992
- Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Duke University Press, 2003