

ELDORADO – Where Would You Search for It?

Vreni Spieser in Conversation with Silvia Converso

Vreni Spieser is an artist who works with installation and performance, often in relation to architecture, often in ways that are temporary or impermanent. Her works generate a break with the centuries-old Eurocentric view of the world to adopt a postcolonial perspective. A central theme in this task is her interest in ornament, itself a product of migration, adaptation, and transformation. She creates alternative spaces that can be read as a counter-position within our culture, where critical reflection on what already exists is possible and the imaginary of an alternative possible life can be realized.

Silvia Converso: Your artistic practice can be altogether inscribed within your project called ELDORADO. Could you please tell about this project? How does it reflect your travels together with your various artistic projects that you develop in the countries you visit?

Vreni Spieser: It's a bit difficult to give a short answer. I decided to give my working practice this big title ELDORADO when I stayed in Argentina for half a year in 2009. Before travelling there, I participated in an artist residency in France, in Rouen, in the so-called "banlieue", where mostly people from Maghreb and Western Africa live. I tried to involve them into my work and it was kind of successful, especially with of a group of women from Senegal and Mauritania. I did some sort of dancing project and for the closing night of my residency, I organised a performance in the public space where I invited everybody to dance with me and with their own headsets with music. So I spontaneously gave this performance the title ELDORADO. In that moment it was a naive approach, since I did not think too much about the meaning of ELDORADO. It was rather more in the sense of a place for adventure, a place where you can do whatever you like. For me it felt more like dancing during the night-time with a lot of people I met during those two months. It was

like transforming this place for half an hour with a very simple action. So that was the first time I used this expression. Then, shortly after France, I travelled to Argentina, to Buenos Aires, and I still had all those memories and the experience with mainly African women.

I spent a lot of time there, and I was thinking a lot about my work in the past ten years, this journey in France, the current time in Buenos Aires and then back in the 1980s, beginning of the 1990s when I travelled to Western Africa, as I was married twice to a man from that region. Considering all these experiences in my life, I gathered a lot of knowledge about many things, and I was very much involved in the migration issue because of my African husband. Hence all these aspects, alongside my interest in patterns, which is connected with the production of textiles, which is connected with sea ferries, which is connected with Europeans travelling all over, with the story of slavery, and then and then and then, so I thought, if I give all this the title ELDORADO, it's like a big bracket, a big picture, and it gives me the freedom to work. It's as if this term allows me just to continue to research and explore, plus it visually also includes my own biography. I still don't exactly know how to research it, but it's a never-ending research process.

SC: How would you now relate your project ELDORADO with the question of borders and migration that has lately become a more and more burning issue according to many points of view?

VS: Since the late 1980s, I have always been reading about the migration theme, especially about Western Africa, as I experienced this region myself and I also met people there so I am able to understand the context in a way. Sometimes for me it's a bit annoying because of the media—it looks as if it's a new phenomenon, but it's not new at all. I am very much interested in migration but I don't want to work only on migration in a narrow sense. I don't

know, for example, anything about Syria but now I do because of the newspapers, and I have therefore more access to it automatically. So I just continue the way I have always been working.

SC: In the past months you had the chance to closely work and do workshops with migrants and intervene in the public space where they stayed in Belgrade and do activities with them at a camp in Athens. Can you tell us about this experience? Was it the first time for you working with migrants?

VS: I participated in this very short-term, three-week artist residency called “Sound Development City”, a travelling residency that always takes place in two European cities and connects them through one week of travel. In 2015, it happened in Belgrade and Athens. I basically applied because of the two cities. I had never been to Athens but I had been once to Belgrade in 1988 for one day. I had always wanted to return there for a very special story that I have with Belgrade, as I stayed there on the way to Ghana where I got married. It was a marriage trip to Ghana, since it was the easiest way to marry somebody from Western Africa and allow them to enter Europe. My intention to take part in the residency was therefore very much connected to my personal geopolitics, rather than working with refugees. But on the other hand, I was very aware that the route between Athens and Belgrade was exactly the way refugees have been choosing to enter. Since March 2015, I have been following the news about it in the media. So I had two main reasons to apply: one personal, the other a more political one. This is quite important for my Eldorado project—this mix of biographical material with global history or geopolitics.

It was just about the two cities—the idea of being in an unknown place. The residency participants and I stayed all in the same hotel in Belgrade, and it was next to the park where the refugees camped, on the hotspot where they arrived by buses and taxis and continued their trip again. I could see them in the park from my hotel room. It was like being the middle of the whole story. So I prepared myself to do a little project with two posters. It was basically a very simple gesture or action consisting of these two posters, one in English *ELDORADO, where would you search for it*, the other one with the Serbian translation, and I started gluing them in the streets of Belgrade. My focus was not on refugees. Only the *ELDORADO* thing is worthwhile to everybody. It was just about thinking about it, if anybody would perhaps react to it and give me the chance to discover the city.

SC: How about the chance to get in contact with refugees and share experiences?

VS: At the beginning I felt surprised as well as overwhelmed. It was raining like hell. I had a little trolley, I had my posters, and I was wearing white overalls, like a painter. So I started doing this and I felt really shy. It is not something I do really often, plus I did not know the place. I did not speak the language; they told me it is impossible to get permission in Belgrade to do it officially so I felt scared that the police were going to come and that I was putting myself into danger. So I started slowly, kind of shy while I was getting used to it, and I did not go to the other places. The Belgrade people did not react at all. Instead, it was the refugees that showed more interest. Three Syrian men approached me offering me a cigarette, so I had a chat with them. They spoke very little English, mostly the boy could, as he learnt it at school, so he was translating for his father and his uncle. They were on their way to Sweden, and they told me they had been travelling not by train or by bus, only by taxi. The other day some people asked me what I was doing; it was a group of two men and a woman from Somalia. The woman was standing there and watching me glue the posters. The man's English was much better so he was asking me what I was doing, what *ELDORADO* was. In Belgrade, it felt like being more in the middle of the refugees issue; I could not do anything else without thinking about it as it was so present, so strong the whole thing. Then I took the train from Skopje and from there to Thessaloniki by bus. The train from Belgrade to Skopje is exactly they travel and the way they have been walking, just the other way round. It was stopping on the border, then waiting two or three hours, and then we heard them walking. I felt like I was in those movies from the 1930s or '40s where you see these refugees walking and crossing borders. Strange, but I was sitting there feeling guilty. But then I asked myself why should I feel guilty, it's just like this. Yet, I could not help feeling this way. I guess it is the Western problem, this sense of guilt and responsibility, which isn't completely wrong, probably...

In Athens we had local staff helping us. They asked me to do a workshop there with patterns based on the word *ELDORADO*. But before we started to think and talk about it, they asked me who could participate in the workshop. Ideally, everybody interested in pattern-making, in architecture and design, whatever, I said. But then I thought that people with migration background very often also have access to pattern-making as they come from places where they are used to wearing and living with patterns. So

I simply suggested that people with a migration background should also participate.

SC: What difficulties did you encounter, or rather, what surprised you the most about their participation? How did you manage to connect with them despite not speaking their language?

VS: We had the chance to have a translator from Greek to Farsi working at the camp where the workshop was held. We also had flyers, and we walked around the centre for about half an hour, trying to search for people, present ourselves, and explain the whole thing. There were refugees who were very friendly, kind of interested. The plan was to present myself and let them get the whole idea. So I figured out how big the centre was, I planned on doing an introduction of myself, of ELDORADO project, then a little introduction how patterns can be done and applied considering the limited time we had. That was the main goal of the workshop: working in groups. People were really friendly.

It was not a project only about refugees; we had some architects coming from the outside, some friends of friends, and our group. It was a bit of a mixture. As for the communication, we had a man from Afghanistan who has been living in Athens for a while, so he was translating my English into Farsi and the other way round. We had roughly twenty or thirty participants. They worked in a very concentrated manner: men and some children but no women. We talked about ELDORADO and some knew the word; they asked me if it's a town, or if they ever discovered it, and so on. Then I started showing them how to make patterns through photocopies. They tried it out themselves, and everybody started to work. That was surprising for me and very beautiful to see, very touching. I did workshops with professionals before. Yet with such a limited time frame and with people of different origins everything was very fast, immediate, and very beautiful. Unfortunately, I could not really verbally communicate with them but somehow, with all these traditions with cardboards and patterns that people have in Afghanistan, we managed to connect on a different level, even if they were not familiar with the alphabet nor ELDORADO. It was a big group and everybody was working with the same elements without complications, because it's a very easy and practical technique. You don't need to speak a lot. You just communicate by working together and in the end you build up something, like a house, one piece after the other.

SC: How did these experiences change the way you envision your project and your ideas of borders? Which impact did they personally have on you?

VS: I heard stories from refugees. I have been working a lot with them, but not really talking to them. Already in Belgrade I thought I had to become more radical and just finish what I was doing—otherwise one risks being overwhelmed. I became sometimes really angry about the whole system, making a profit from the refugees and the situation because in Belgrade a lot of the refugees kept on asking me where they could find a Western Union store. This inspired me to create a side story in Belgrade, as you cannot find information about Western Union in the Internet. I could only find one article about the fact that they make huge profits along the migratory movements.¹

As for the workshop at the refugee centre, for me now the goal is not to keep on doing workshops with refugees in different centres. It was rather that moment and that experience. It was in a much wider frame, in a bigger picture and sense—meeting people it's per se a simple way. But you can really also do things together in such an inspiring way. Nobody asks you why you are doing it or for money. It's the moment per se that becomes really powerful, and that's the thing I am always fighting for wherever and whenever I do workshops of this type. I know it's a naive approach, but it's a moment that I try to keep with these people. In Athens, I was glad they participated because without their participation this would have not happened. I don't like forcing people to do things but then if this happens, then it's very strong. I am more concerned about creating a situation and a setting, in which people can fit in very easily and naturally. I think in this way you could do a lot of things. Back in the 1980s, I was pretty involved in Switzerland with this issue concerning the refugees, whereas now I deal with it in a different way and I transfer this discourse into my work. I used to like it, though. I just do not like the tendency that this discourse has taken lately in Switzerland. They put them in some villages or they tend to segregate them in areas that are not really visible. As I said, my ELDORADO project is actually bigger than this, and I still have my interest in patterns and it's also about people with their dreams and needs. I did not change my focus. It's not about Syria, it's not about Afghanistan, it's not about Somalia—it's about something way bigger than this. Something global and totally human. I haven't believed in borders for a long time. I know it's a utopian stupid thing to say, but I think that borders should disappear immediately. It's an

artificial construction of power. But I know it will not happen. I am really realistic as a person, but I like to see it in this much bigger picture. As soon as I have the chance I will do these workshops again, but I do not push them to happen. I don't want to travel and become a specialist on this topic. Plus I do not feel myself as a helping person. It's more about the exchange and the opportunity to relate to each other.

SC: If you could pick 10 words that define similar patterns to your vision of ELDORADO, especially in relation to yourself, which ones would you chose?

VS: I don't really search for ELDORADO, I am more observing everything around it. But ideally it would be:

very big cities, escapes, friends, movement, giving dreams a big value, free basic income for everybody, replacement of religion through ethics, daily dancing, putting a sense of humour into almost everything, living in foreign places, the disappearance of the SVP, cats.

Captions

1 Vreni Spieser, *Terra Incognita*, 2015: Poster-gluing in the streets of Belgrade. Photograph: Svetlana Marchenko © Vreni Spieser.

2 Verni Spieser, *Terra Incognita*, 2015: Final performance in Athens. Punkistan or let us cultivate our toenails. Photograph: Dimitris Polymenopoulos © Vreni Spieser.

3 Vreni Spieser, *Terra Incognita*, 2015: Workshop (Patterns against the stream or how to occupy the public space in a different way), Elaionas, Center for Refugees, Athens. Photograph: Maria Petinaki © Vreni Spieser.

4 Vreni Spieser, *Terra Incognita*, 2015: People and places in Skopje, Adran (Hitchhiking to Eldorado). Photograph: Adran © Vreni Spieser.

Notes

1 Western Union charges a fee of 15% on the amount being transferred. That is to say that for €200 the commission costs are around €30. However, Western Union can be considered one of the most reliable companies allowing safe money transfer.

Vreni Spieser (b. 1963) is a Zurich-based artist who works with installations and performances, both on a local and global level. Her artistic practice can be inscribed with the term ELDORADO: it reflects her ongoing research process that takes her to explore themes such as migration, post-colonialism, travels, adaptation, dance, and ornament through which she creates alternative spaces for counter-culture. Some of her most significant projects are "Vitrine/Eldorado-Wunderkammer" at the senior residency Frauensteinmatt, Zug (2011–12), "Going Public", Zug (2014), "El Zumbido Alrededor", Buenos Aires (2011) and "Les fêtes", Rouen (2008).

Silvia Converso (b. 1985) is a cultural producer with a solid background in literature and a keen interest in architecture and socially engaged art. She completed studies in languages and literature, focusing on the interdisciplinarity of arts. She worked as project coordinator for the major festivals of arts and literature in Europe (international literaturfestival berlin, Hay Festival in Hay-on-Wye/Wales, Festaletteratura in Mantua). In particular, she was actively involved in the programme of the Festivals in Prison, organizing lectures and cultural activities with inmates. Since 2013, Converso has been living in Zurich. She is currently studying at the Postgraduate Programme in Curating ZHdK and works as a communication consultant for art and architecture and as an independent curator in the field of socially engaged art practices.

