



Figure 2: Skopje Horseman Statue.

nationalist Macedonian government was spending its resources on immense monuments to mythologized heroes of Macedonian people. A newly commissioned, 30 metre high, gold plated statue of Alexander the Great astride a horse dominates Skopje's main square. In this Macedonia there was simply no place for queers, Roma, and other 'outsiders'.

The Macedonian activists we were working with were experienced, smart, creative... and embattled. Feeling themselves pushed out of their own country, their first response was to push back. All the actions they initially proposed included some sort of confrontational provocation: the proverbial middle finger stuck up to those who were doing the same to them. These actions would be emotionally satisfying, and might even generate some media attention... but with what ultimate result? The right-wing government was selling the fantasy that queers and Roma were a threat to Macedonian society, and we would be demonstrating the same thing. Not the best idea.

So we did some more brainstorming. We came up with a lot of wonderfully silly ideas. Since Alexander the Great was famous for having male lovers, we thought of staging a queer Alexander the Great talk show and broadcasting it on local TV. A fun possibility, but since we only had 21 hours to plan, prepare and stage an action, we rejected this one... and about twenty others. But through these absurd ideas came the kernel of good one: why not create the country we wanted Macedonia to be? A diverse, accepting, loving Macedonia. We could not do it for real. But we could do it for a brief time, as a performance.

Over the next day and night we built a new Macedonia. Playing off the country's much-despised official name: The Former Yugoslav Republic of

Macedonia, we called our country The Future Republic of the Former Republic of Macedonia. For our new republic we printed passports – and instead of a binary choice for gender we offered a spectrum, and pencils with erasers so people could change their minds. Since Macedonia was a chock with statues, we built an empty statue podium for people to climb upon and hold aloft signs declaring themselves everyday hero and heroines of Macedonia. We had music, and food and tables to draw upon for kids. We had banners inviting people to sit down, talk and get to know their LGBTQ and Roma fellow citizens. Finally, we erected an entrance to our New Republic complete with a border guard to check papers.

For two hours, on a beautiful Saturday in the capital city's most popular park, we welcomed people into our Utopia. And they came: the usual activist and artist suspects, of course, but also parents with kids, old people, teenagers and the curious. More than 500 people took our passports, entered the gates, claimed their rights as heroes and heroines, and pledged their allegiance to a more open and accepting Macedonia. (And to underscore the principle that no Utopia is ever perfect, we inadvertently forgot to assign anyone to call the press so our Republic was ignored by the Macedonian media.) Nevertheless, it was the biggest and most inclusive demonstration of marginalized peoples in the capital in almost a decade.

Our Future Republic of the Former Republic of Macedonia 'demonstrated', not what the activists were against, but what we were for. It may have lasted only for a little while, but it inspired the activists, and the participants, to imagine an alternative Macedonia. Our Utopia allowed them to ask: What if?

CRITIQUE: UTOPIA LETS US LOOK BACK AT OUR OWN SOCIETY CRITICALLY

A step into Utopia is a step into an alternate world, and once this alternative has been experienced, our relationship with our own world is fundamentally altered. Think about what it is like travelling to other places and experiencing other cultures. Yes, we get to know the new culture, but in that process we also see our own culture in a new light. It is the same thing when visiting Utopia. Once we have been to the future we look backwards on the present with new eyes. What we once accepted as the only option is now understood as only one of many possibilities. Our perspective shifts.

In the late 1990s Duncombe was involved with a group of artists and activists who transformed New York City subway trains into rolling parties. We would meet at a certain subway stop at a certain time, and then enter the train en masse, hanging cellophane over the subway lights, covering advertisements with streamers, passing around drinks and party favours, and setting up a boom-box or bringing aboard a live band. For the next hour or so, as everyday New Yorkers boarded and departed, all the way out to the end of the line at Coney Island, the subway car ceased being merely a means of transportation and became an exuberant party.

Part of the purpose of the train parties was pure fun: the joy of making our own free party instead of paying for overpriced drinks at a club. But there was a political objective as well: to change people's perspective about their everyday urban experience. What mattered most was not what happened that night on the train, but what happened to people on their next day's morning commute. What once seemed normal: riding a train illuminated by harsh

white lights, surrounded by advertisements, and crushed up against people who refuse to acknowledge one another, would now seem cold, inhuman and absurd compared to the experience of riding the Utopia train.

If one reason to stage Utopia is to urge people to ask the question: What if? Another function is to ask the question: Why not? One of the great powers of art is to shift our perspective: to get us to look at what we have looked at a 100 times over in a new way. By exhibiting a urinal in an art gallery, for example, Marcel Duchamp changed the way we look at everyday items – as well art. The Futurists, Cubists and Surrealists showed us multiple ways of seeing reality. Utopia, by taking us out of our world, allows us to then look back upon it with critical eyes.

GENERATE: UTOPIA SPAWNS IDEAS OF OTHER UTOPIAS

Utopia is no-place. It is no-place because what is imagined it simply impossible, or because it is merely staged and performed for a brief time. This seems like a critical flaw with Utopia. Why create an ideal that can never be reached? This ‘flaw’, however, is the genius of Utopia. As we explained above, Thomas More designed Utopia with this flaw in mind. Unable to live in his world, we are forced to imagine our own.

In the summer of 2014 we were invited to St Petersburg, Russia to run a workshop with a group of artistic activists. The Russians we worked with were highly accomplished in staging spectacular artistic interventions that garnered a great deal of global attention, but they were also self-critical of this practice, and wanted to develop projects that resonated with local people and addressed local issues. So, in order to create pieces that spoke to everyday Russians and their concerns we did some research.

Along with a group of radical social scientists from St Petersburg, we surveyed the people in a working-class neighbourhood on the outskirts of the city. We asked people what they liked and did not like in their neighbourhood. With a fierce devotion to *their* neighbourhood, the residents all spoke of the strength of the local community. But they also had complaints: deteriorating public spaces to meet up and socialize with their fellow neighbours. As we probed further, we discovered the residents had a common dream: waterfront access to the beautiful canals that traverse St Petersburg and wind through their neighbourhood. In talking with these residents we also experienced an all too familiar sense of fatalism regarding the possibility of things getting any better. Some might say, of course, this is ingrained in the ‘Russian Soul’, but we – and our Russian comrades – saw this fatalism as an obstacle to overcome.

With our knowledge of the community in hand we got to work. Our goal was a revitalization of public space in the community and the creation of a vibrant civic society that would make this happen. We planned out an entire creative campaign, with multiple objectives. We brainstormed dozens of tactics. We had a grand plan, but with less than a day to pull off something, we decided to execute one of the simplest pieces proposed: to build the waterfront beach dreamed of by the people in the neighbourhood.

We located a landing by the canal next to a busy street. We brought in beach chairs, palm trees (actually a Russian apple tree but no one seemed to mind), and beach balls. We donned swimsuits, laid out towels, tossed frisbees, and danced to music. Recycling an old Situationist slogan, we hung a banner above us proclaiming ‘Beneath the Paving Stones the Beach’. We passed out



Figure 7: St. Petersburg Beach.

flyers to the neighbours, invited local politicians and for a couple of hours, on the shores of the Griboedova Canal, in St Petersburg, Russia, we enacted the neighbourhood's dream.

But, only for a couple of hours. It was never our intent to realize the local resident's dream; our goal was to help create a community that would organize themselves to realize their own dreams. This was the real function of our little project. We built a beach to stimulate residents' imagination about what it might be possible to do – and then we turned off our music, rolled up our towels, packed up our chairs and left. We created Utopia and made sure it was no-place. If there was going to be a real beach, with sustained maintenance, and things like sand and actual palm trees, it was going to have to come from the imaginations and through the organization of the people whose neighbourhood this was. What we were doing was not meant to be a definitive solution delivered by outsiders, but simply a model of what could be – an aid to dreaming.

If one way to stimulate public imagination is to realize Utopia, and then make it disappear, another tactic is to conjure up Utopias so outlandish, and so absurd, that they can never be realized at all. Remember that project that Lambert was working on with urban planners in San Francisco, where he and his collaborator Packard Jennings asked them to imagine their ultimate win? Well, after pushing the 'experts' a bit further wilder ideas started to surface. An elected Bay Area Rapid Transit commissioner imagined being able to have a good cocktail on the train, and another transportation specialist wondered if something like a zip-line would be feasible to move people long distances with no carbon imprint. They even got the urban planners who simply wanted 'more trees and bus lines' to dream more ambitiously: thinking about large-scale parks and wilderness areas that sprawled across the city. Then Lambert and Jennings exaggerated these ideas and illustrated

truly desirable State would look like. And so on, ad infinitum. In other words, these impossible 'solutions' are a means to imagine new ones.

And this is not just hypothetical – these thought processes actually happened. People had conversations in front of the posters about how a zip-line transit system *could* work. When Lambert and Jennings gave a public presentation of the project – on a panel alongside the city planners – the citizens in the audience ran with the ideas on the posters but then began suggesting their own, equally Utopian, if a bit less absurd, proposals. Policy changed too. The head of the Municipal Transit Authority started hosting weekly meetings with his staff to discuss impossibilities, and through those conversations were able to push the edges of what was truly possible.

ORIENT: UTOPIA GIVES US A DIRECTION TO GO

This aspect of Utopia has more strategic than tactical implications. It is less help in creating a piece, but essential in the bigger work of planning a campaign or making sense of one's trajectory as an artistic activist. It is easy to lose our way when working on any sort of long-term project. We get distracted, lost in the details, we bounce from one task to another, and sooner or later we look up and ask yourself: How did I get here? Do I want to be here? And, most important, where do I want to be? Without a clear sense of direction we will careen from one thing to another; interested in this topic this week, and working on that project the next. It is good to have broad interests and try lots of new things, but if we do not know where we are

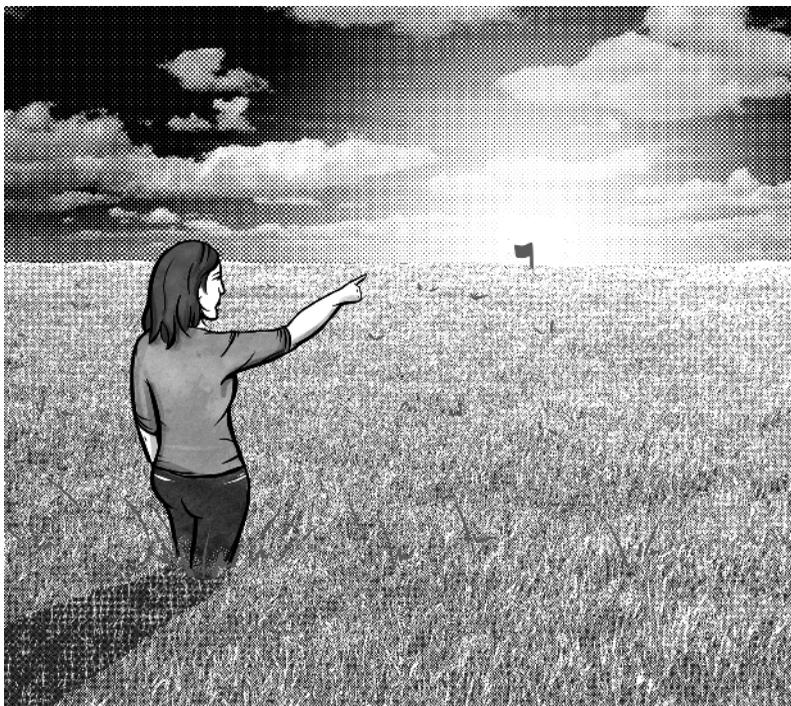


Figure 10: Utopia Orients Us.