

# The Legacy of Independent Projects in the 1990s



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I wish to thank my coworkers and all our partners for contributing to the realization of this project.

Aleš Vaupotič, Director, Moderna galerija

**D**uring the transition in the 1990s, the region of former Yugoslavia saw a growing need to find new spaces for cultural production and establish closer international connections as well as maintain the regional ones. Changes in legislation brought about a transformation of the concept of artistic work. The utopianism of art collectives was replaced by the pragmatism and flexibility of associations and private institutes largely dependent on public funds and international donations. Artists became producers, and their survival and that of cultural workers became dependent on the duration of individual projects, which contributed to the growing number of precarious workers. Today, as the precariousness of work only increases, the significance of these changes needs to be reflected upon, also in terms of whether they precipitated the need for horizontal connections and rethinking the legacy of independent organizations of the 1990s.

**F**ocusing on specific local and regional cases, the symposium aims to shed light on the differences in the conditions under which non-governmental organizations in the new, post-Yugoslav countries work, from (post)war conditions to changes in the way contemporary art is financed. The main point of interest is the paradigm shift that took place in the 1990s as the concept of independent culture emerged, resulting from breaking with the legacy of the 1980s and the gradual abandoning of the concept of “alternative culture.”

Igor Španjol

Ana Đikoli

# Art Scene under Siege – the Obala Art Centre

*If a city is dying on the inside, then it is killed on the outside, both literally and metaphorically.*

Sadudin Musabegović, *Žargon otpatka*

The war in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the siege of Sarajevo started in the spring of 1992, and the established urban way of life was suddenly and violently interrupted. Without water, electricity, food, with the danger of bullets and shrapnel grenades lurking around every corner – life went on, transformed and adjusted. People lost their lives daily and endured different horrors of war, while staging a normal life in their basements, and while the authorities advised them *not to be idle*, so as not to fall into a state of despair.<sup>1</sup> The mobilised were sent to the front and, when possible, people were allowed to go to work, children to school. This process of adapting to a new quotidian birthed the need to compensate cultural life in the city, because if life had not come to a standstill, then it was impossible to prevent cultural activities. Newspaper articles testified to this by writing not only about Sarajevo's flourishing cultural activities, but also about people led by an unstoppable creative urge and a community that refused to give up. In the very first year of the war there were many headlines such as: "Painters exhibit their paintings in hallways", "Hyper production of hits in Sarajevo recording studios", "Premiere of the first war show 'Sklonište' performed by SARTR", "20 authors exhibited a map of graphic sheets SA 92", and so on.<sup>2</sup>

In an attempt to prevent the city being killed, or it dying from within, individuals and the community used culture to de-

1 Suada Kapić, *Opsada Sarajeva: mart 1992–mart 1996* (Sarajevo: Fama, 2005).

2 Ibid.

fend not only their home but their own sanity. The phrase *cultural resistance* became very popular, and it faithfully sums up the reality of the art scene under siege. Against basic existential impulses, numerous cultural events were planned, organised and realised in what today would be considered impossible working conditions. Of course, in terms of organising any cultural event, a high degree of improvisation and ingenuity was necessary. Such endeavours were not in vain. Even though every attempt to step out of the safety of the shelter was risky, people did so not only to get water or food, but also to see an exhibition, play, or concert. Fifty concerts and over a hundred exhibitions and theatre performances were held during the siege.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout the siege, there was a lot of exhibiting activity in Sarajevo galleries: the “Gabrijel” gallery of Chamber Theatre 55, the “Mak” gallery of the Museum of Literature and Theatre Art of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the “Paleta” gallery. The Obala Gallery<sup>4</sup> made an outstanding contribution by organising numerous artistic events and fighting to preserve the art scene of a city under siege. From a historical distance, today it seems like fate that the Red Cross building which housed the “Sutjeska” cinema was shelled and destroyed. It was this cinema space that was rented as a new space for the activities of Obala. The hall was completely destroyed, but those gathered around Obala decided to use it anyway, maybe in memory of what could have been, but mostly in defiance of the terrifying reality. The beginning of the Obala Gal-

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3 “Kultura”, Sarajevo 1426. Accessed: 16. 11. 2022, <https://sarajevo1425.ba/kultura/>

4 The Obala Open Stage was founded in 1984 with productions in the fields of theatre, music, film and the visual arts. The Obala Gallery was established with the move to a rented space, the Red Cross building. In the following years, the people who gathered around the Obala Gallery formed the Obala Art Centre, which opened a new gallery in 1995 in the space of the Academy of Fine Arts (UNSA), and in the same year it hosted one of the most renowned regional film festivals, the Sarajevo Film Festival.

lery's activities was marked by an invitation to Sarajevo artists "to pay homage with their works to both theirs and all other cultural buildings destroyed in our city".<sup>5</sup>

Fatefully or not, time and space inspired the birth of the most important art exhibition during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, *Witnesses of Existence*. The exhibition was the result of several solo exhibitions held in the Obala Gallery from December 1992 to April 1993. The organiser owed the exhibition's significant title to Nusret Pašić, whose solo exhibition *Witnesses of Existence* inaugurated the operation of the Obala Gallery. The ruined space served as the perfect stage for creating a series of exhibitions, which through different artistic forms testified to the ways artists experienced the reality of war. In April 1993, Zoran Bogdanović, Sanjin Jukić, Ante Jurić, Edin Numankadić, Nusret Pašić, Mustafa Skopljak, Radoslav Tadić and Petar Waldegg<sup>6</sup> presented their works in a group exhibition organised with the utmost solemnity. The ex-

Exhibition *Witnesses of Existence* at the National Gallery of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 1993. Photo: Milomir Kovačević Strašni



hibition layout was designed by the architects Tanja and Stjepan Roš to reflect the space that evoked the basic form of a basilica as a "sacred temple",

5 Muhamed Dželilović and Nermina Kurspahić, *Svjedoci postojanja* (Sarajevo: Galerija Obala, 1993), np.

6 Nusret Pašić (*Witnesses of Existence*, 2 December 1992), Zoran Bogdanović (23 December 1992), Ante Jurić (*Spirituality-Destruction-Rematerialization*, 23 December 1992), Mustafa Skopljak (*Sarajevo '90, '91, '92, '93*, 20 January 1993), Petar Waldegg (*Step by Step*, 20 January 1993), Edin Numankadić (*Traces of War*, 3 February 1993), Sanjin Jukić (*Ghetto-Spectacle*, 17 February 1993), Radoslav Tadić (*Omen*, 10 March 1993).

wherein each artwork retained its “autonomy and integrity”. The exhibition consisted of spatial interventions and installations, which were for some artists a significant step outside their usual art-making habits. The exhibition was accompanied by a catalogue which noted that it was prepared and printed in “impossible working conditions”.

Given that the news of this series of exhibitions gained international attention, its potential recognised as a timely artistic response to the violence happening and as *testimony*, the Obala Gallery was invited to present Bosnia and Herzegovina at the Venice Biennale. Unfortunately, *Witnesses of Existence* was not presented at the Biennale due to the blockade of the city, which prevented the artists from leaving the country. Instead of an official presentation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, a video work by Srđan Vuletić and the exhibition catalogue were displayed at the Biennale. The reasons why the artists were forbidden from leaving the country were the same as those that prevented others from entering it, and the possibility of visiting and supporting Sarajevo under siege – artistic activities were not considered to be of existential importance.

*Witnesses of Existence* also experienced another important presentation, albeit in Sarajevo. Obala had partnered with the National Gallery of Bosnia and Herzegovina in the production of numerous exhibitions, and in 1993 the exhibition was moved from its original space and opened at the National Gallery of Bosnia and Herzegovina,<sup>7</sup> “in a gallery space that was sufficiently preserved despite the war”.<sup>8</sup> Since the exhibition was created in the Obala Gallery and specifically for its ruined interior that faithfully repli-

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7 Ante Jurić and Radoslav Tadić did not exhibit works at the National Gallery of Bosnia and Herzegovina exhibition (12/11–15/12/2022).

8 Karim Zaimović, “Svjedoci ne kao drugi”, in: *Odabrani tekstovi iz magazina ‘Dani’ 1992-1995* (Sarajevo: Fondacija “Karim Zaimović”: Kaligraf, 2005), 63.

cated the events in Sarajevo, the artists drew not only inspiration but also materials from the space. This was particularly obvious in Ante Jurić's *Corner-Unmuddied Form Leaned Against a White Fabric and a Wall in the Shelled Building of the Open Stage Obala*, for which the artist used materials he found in the space, such as waste, bricks and mud.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, changing the exhibiting space was twofold: formal and fundamental. Formally, setting up the exhibition at the National Gallery of Bosnia and Herzegovina made it possible to extend the length of exhibition time, which was short at the Obala Gallery – between a couple of hours, or one day, to a week. Essentially, changing the space ultimately affected the way the exhibition was perceived by visitors: “creating ‘witnesses’ for the installations and adding a necessary dose of the ironic shift”.<sup>10</sup>

The Obala Gallery did not stop at the success of *Witnesses of Existence*. It truly acted as the cultural ambassador of Bosnia and Herzegovina; there were talks of Bosnian and Herzegovinian artists exhibiting abroad, as well as visits from renowned photographers and artists to Sarajevo. However, it was impossible to lose sight of the reality of war for even a moment, so only easily transportable exhibitions were organised, i.e., predominantly photography. From 1993, Obala organised a series of exhibitions mostly with friends of Bosnia and Herzegovina from abroad, such as Annie Leibovitz, who presented her photo exhibition *Sarajevo Portraits* at the National Gallery of Bosnia and Herzegovina (1/10–4/11/1993). The exhibition was preceded by the photographer's one-month residence in Sarajevo, and it drew the attention of the public and many visitors, as demonstrated by photographs shot by one of Bosnia and Herzegovina's most respected photographers, Milomir Kovačević Strašni, who opened his exhibition *Apocalypse Now* in November 1993.

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9 Dželilović and Kurspahić, *Svjedoci postojanja*, np.

10 Zaimović, “Svjedoci”, 63.

Obala had a successful succession of exhibitions:

Jean-Christian Bourcart and Josephine Guattari (January 1994), Paul Lowe (22 January–February 1994), World Press Photo (the National Gallery of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 27 April–14 May 1994), Sophie Ristelhueber (*Aftermath*, April 1994), and Christian Boltanski (25 June–16 July 1994). And while the very organisation of exhibitions in Sarajevo raised the morale of the citizens and proved that they were not alone or forgotten, perhaps even more important was Obala's work in organising visits and appearances abroad, which led to *Witnesses of Existence* being on show in New York (Kunsthal-le, February 1994), Biel in Switzerland (Pasquart, May–July 1994), Edinburgh (Demarco European Art Foundation, August 1994), and Innsbruck (Kunsthalle Innsbruck, March 1995), while Nusret Pašić and Mustafa Skopljak actually visited Geneva (February 1995).

In the spring of 1995, the Open Society Fund of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Obala Art Centre organised the lecture of Suzanne Meszoly, director of the Soros Centre for Contemporary Art in Budapest, where the opening of the SCCA in Sarajevo was announced.<sup>11</sup> The lecture was held at the Academy of Fine Arts, in the same space where in September 1995 Obala opened its new exhibition space. The new gallery was opened with a second World Press Photo exhibition. This was followed by the Miriam Cahn exhibition (*The Body – Which is Watching*

Preparations for the exhibition *Sarajevo Portraits* by Annie Liebovitz, National Gallery of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 1993. Photo: Milomir Kovačević Strašni



11 The Soros Center for Contemporary Art in Sarajevo opened in December 1996.

*Me*, 14 November–3 December 1995) and many other activities, such as Nusret Pašić's solo exhibition, and Antony Gormley's repeatedly postponed exhibition.

Working in the peculiar circumstances of the war was hampered by many factors – creators lacked many of the basic means of their work, and thus were forced to find new ways of expression using available materials and recycling old ones. On the other hand, there was no lack of inspiration being drawn from each moment of survival. Art spoke in an authentic, sincere language. The organisation of planned activities was difficult due to basic elementary and self-evident reasons, but sometimes also for reasons that could easily have caused project failure today, namely, due to a simple misunderstanding of the assumption that culture and art are a fact of life, a necessity, like water, food and shelter.

Exhibition *Aftermath* by Sophie Ristelhueber, National Gallery of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 1994. Photo: Milomir Kovačević Strašni



Obala was unable to realise several collaborations (like exhibiting at the Venice Biennale) because visitor entry had to be based on humanitarian or political work. However, the activities that were realised – such as exhibitions, concerts, theatre plays, lectures, and film screenings – brought a breath of normality to inhabitants of a

city under siege and the possibility of seeing cultural events that were happening in the world. Obala contributed to global public awareness of the cultural scene in Bosnia and Herzegovina, thus affirming the role of culture and art as principal instruments of diplomacy. Maintaining this art scene and promoting it outside of Bosnia and Herzegovina was a contribution to the survival of the spirit, and herein Obala is ranked among the most active protagonists of the period.

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Nikola Gelevski

# Freedom is not Free

Communism or capitalism?

Communism or capitalism? Or to put it another way: are people “naturally good” (tolerant, generous, willing to sacrifice...) or “naturally evil” (selfish, intolerant, destructive...)? And what motivates us to act the most: material rewards or something else?

In his book *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us* (2009), Daniel Pink provides some very interesting answers to these questions. According to Pink, research in the behavioural sciences often suggests that extrinsic incentives (monetary rewards, for example) can be counterproductive, and we reach optimal results when people find inherent meaning in what they do. Incentives are probably important when people need to be induced to do some boring, routine tasks. However, for intellectually more complex tasks, the success of individuals (and organisations) depends much more on resourcefulness and innovation.

Pink warns of three elements that are the basis for such motivation: autonomy – the ability to choose the tasks and how they are solved; mastering the procedure of acquiring skill in a certain activity; and the goal, the desire to make the world better. As Daniel Pink said about a study conducted at MIT:

They took a whole group of students and they gave them a set of challenges. Things like memorizing strings of digits solving word puzzles, other kinds of spatial puzzles, even physical tasks like throwing a ball through a hoop. OK, they gave them these challenges and they said to incentivize their performance they gave them 3 levels of rewards. OK? So if you did pretty well, you got a small monetary reward. If you did medium well, you got a medium monetary reward. And if you did really well, if you were one of the top performers you got a large cash prize. (...) Here's what they found out. 1. As long as the task involved only mechanical skill bonuses worked as they would be expected the higher the pay, the

better their performance. Ok, that makes sense, but here's what happens. But once the task calls for even rudimentary cognitive skill a larger reward led to poorer performance.

Now this is strange, right? A larger reward led to poorer performance. How can that possibly be? Now what's interesting about this is that these folks here who did this are all economists: 2 at MIT, 1 at the University of Chicago, 1 at Carnegie Mellon, the top tier of the economics profession. And they're reaching this conclusion that seems contrary to what a lot of us learned in economics which is that the higher the reward, the better the performance. And they're saying that once you get above rudimentary cognitive skill it's the other way around which seems like this kind of the idea that these rewards don't work that way seems vaguely Left-Wing and Socialist, doesn't it? It's this kind of weird Socialist conspiracy.

For those of you who have these conspiracy theories I want to point out the notoriously left-wing socialist group that financed the research: The Federal Reserve Bank. (...) Maybe that 50 dollars or 60 dollars prize isn't sufficiently motivating for an MIT student, right?

So let's go to a place where 50 dollars is actually more significant relatively. So we take the experiment, we're going to Madurai, India. Rural India, where 50 dollars, 60 dollars whatever the number was, is actually a significant sum of money. So they replicated the experiment in India (...). (...)

What happened though, was that the people offered the medium reward did no better than the people offered the small reward but this time around, the people offered the top reward they did worst of all. Higher incentives led to worse performance. (...)

This has been replicated over and over and over again by psychologists by sociologists and by economists, over and over and over again. For simple, straight-forward tasks, those kinds of incentives if you do this then you get that, they're great! (...) But when the task gets more complicated when it requires some conceptual, creative thinking, those kind of motivators demonstrably don't work.

Fact: Money is a motivator, at work. But in a slightly strange way if you don't pay people enough they won't be motivated. What's curious about, there's another paradox here which is the best use of money as a motivator is to pay people enough to take the issue of money off the table. Pay people enough, so they are not thinking about money and they're thinking about the work. (...)

(...) You get a bunch of people around the world who are doing highly skilled work but they're willing to do it for free and volunteer their time 20, sometimes 30 hours a week. (...) [W]hat they create, they give it away, rather than sell it. (...) Why are people doing this? Why are these people, many of whom are technically sophisticated, highly skilled people who have jobs, ok? They have jobs! They're working at jobs for pay doing challenging, sophisticated, technological work. And yet, during their limited discretionary time they do equally, if not more, technically sophisticated work not for their employer, but for someone else for free! That's a strange economic behaviour.<sup>1</sup>

### 300

In an essay, Slavoj Žižek analyses Zack Snyder's film *300*, the saga of the three hundred Spartan soldiers who sacrificed themselves at Thermopylae to prevent the invasion of Xerxes' Persian

1 Dan Pink, "Drive: The surprising truth about what motivates us", transcript of the RSA lecture available at: <https://multimedia-english.com/print/preview/the-surprising-truth-about-what-motivates-us-2793>, accessed 13 January 2023. (Lecture available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_mG-hhWL\\_ug](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_mG-hhWL_ug).)

army. 300 is an interesting film that has been appropriated and serves as an inspiration to both muscular, patriotic militarists (in the USA, for example) and romantic fighters in small countries struggling against the violence and hegemony of bigger ones (in the film, tiny Greece is attacked by the incomparably larger state of Persia).

The Spartans in the film have a saying: Freedom is not free. (Perhaps this theme, about freedom, dignity, reason, and duty, is somewhat related to the MIT experiment outlined above, and that's why I mention it – to capture analogies and more vivid images.) Thus freedom – from the terror of money and rewards, for example – is not something that is given, but rather gained through hard struggle in which one must be ready to sacrifice everything. As Žižek says, the strong Spartan discipline is not only the external opposite of the Athenian “liberal democracy”, but also a kind of imprinted state, one that lays the foundations for “democracy”: the free subject of Reason can only be born thanks to strong self-discipline.

Žižek continues: “True freedom is not a freedom of choice made from a safe distance, like choosing between a strawberry cake or a chocolate cake; true freedom overlaps with necessity, one makes a truly free choice when one's choice puts at stake one's very existence – one does it because one simply ‘cannot do it otherwise.’ When one's country is under a foreign occupation and one is called by a resistance leader to join the fight against the occupiers, the reason given is not ‘you are free to choose,’ but: ‘Can't you see that this is the only thing you can do if you want to retain your dignity?’”<sup>2</sup>

After all, the French and Soviet revolutionaries were strongly inspired by the Spartan spirit of strong military discipline, which holds a core of freedom. Trotsky, for example, during

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2 Slavoj Žižek, “The True Hollywood Left”, available at: <https://www.lacan.com/zizhollywood.htm>, accessed 13 January 2023.

the difficult years of “war communism” called the Soviet Union “a proletarian Sparta”.

Of course, I open the topics today not to close them at the same time – especially not in such a small space. One of the avenues that open up following this line of questions certainly leads to biopolitics, an extremely interesting scientific discipline which is an area of interest of, among others, Giorgio Agamben, often following the lead of Michel Foucault. One of the important questions of biopolitics is: Do we have our body or are we the body? And, when it comes to the body, can the difference between “having” and “being” be overlooked? According to Agamben, the concrete man is simultaneously a body, an individual consciousness and a collectivity.

## **Art and Revolution**

In an attempt to take a more precise social and political stand, the Austrian philosopher Gerald Raunig refers to Michel Foucault: “The essential political problem for the intellectual is not to criticize the ideological contents supposedly linked to science, or to ensure that his own scientific practice is accompanied by a correct ideology, but that of ascertaining the possibility of constituting a new politics of truth. The problem is not changing people’s consciousness – or what’s in their heads – but the political, economic, institutional regime of the production of truth.”<sup>3</sup>

Agamben’s insight can also direct our attention to the points from which Raunig is trying to act, and these are points of potential action for all of us who are trying to find our own posi-

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3 Michel Foucault, “Truth and Power”, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. by Colin Gordon, transl. by Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham, Kate Soper (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 133. Available at: [https://monoskop.org/images/5/5d/Foucault\\_Michel\\_Power\\_Knowledge\\_Selected\\_Interviews\\_and\\_Other\\_Writings\\_1972-1977.pdf](https://monoskop.org/images/5/5d/Foucault_Michel_Power_Knowledge_Selected_Interviews_and_Other_Writings_1972-1977.pdf), accessed 13 January 2023.



*I'll blow you all up! – said the suicide bomber, while the ice cream in the cone was melting from love. Illustration: Vladimir Lukaš*

tions from which we can offer effective resistance to the perverse structures of power: There is a fertile situation precisely in the zones of indivisibility between artistic practice and political activism, always at that moment in time when we can't make a distinction between life and art, with both simultaneously experiencing a decisive transformation.

There is resistance where there is power. Yet, or even more so, Foucault said, resistance never lies outside of power. According to Raunig, if there is no absolute *externality* to power, then it certainly follows that there is no necessary and absolute subjugation of resistance to power. According to Raunig's interpretation of Foucault, the "strictly relational character of power relations" does not mean that resistance is only a consequent action, a seemingly negative form of power, which would always make it only a passive and subordinate actor.

As Gerhard Raunig says in his book *Art and Revolution*:  
Secondly, resistance is to be understood as heterogeneous, as a multiplicity of points, nodes and focuses of resistance, not as a radical break at the one site of a great Refusal, not as a massive disruption that establishes two fundamental oppositions, not as an antagonism, but rather as an unevenly distributed multitude of points of resistance in an equally diverse landscape of shifting splits and boundaries. This kind of understanding of resistance as multiplicity corresponds to an idea of power that is no longer uniform. Rather than the totality of institutions and apparatuses that guarantee the order of the bourgeois state, Foucault understands power as a diversity of force relations that organize a territory.<sup>4</sup>

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4 Gerald Raunig, *Art and Revolution*, transl. by Aileen Derieg (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007), 49. Available at: <https://selforganizedseminar.files.wordpress.com/2011/08/gerald-raunig-art-and-revolution-transversal-activism-in-the-long-twentieth-century-1.pdf> , accessed 13 January 2023.

Pierre Bourdieu, for example, claims that the symbolic revolution lies at the foundations of the political revolution. Speaking of the struggle over words, such as, for example, was waged in the 18th century over the representation of nature (as primarily manifested by Rousseau's strategy of glorifying the "natural man"), Bourdieu believes that this struggle was the same symbolic revolution which a few decades later determined the political revolution in France.

### **Communism of Affect**

In the 1830s, Tocqueville wrote that French official government institutions were deprived of the very political life itself, so that laxity, incompetence, deadness and boredom reigned in all of them. Tocqueville feared that even in modern societies, people would easily accept being governed by "an immense and tutelary power". But the real danger today lies no longer so much in despotic control, but in fragmentation: the citizenry is less and less able to define a common goal and realise it. Defining a common democratic goal is probably the most difficult thing to accomplish in a fragmented democratic system.

Paul Virilio, speaking about the times we live in, uses an interesting expression: communism of affect. We used to live in "democracies of opinion", which today are replaced by "democracies of emotions". The "communism of affect", according to Virilio, stems from our changed perception of democracy. With the rapid spread of electronic media, we have reached a culture of the spectacle where opinion is not desirable because it is boring. Key decisions today are not made on the basis of thinking but on the basis of feelings, and those feelings are mostly staged in the media. And here lies the key problem: not so much in the emotions themselves, but in the large manipulative space that generates moods at the will of the powerful. Artful (or artificial, or skilled in the dark arts) players manipulate mass sentiments while keeping

the mainstream media under control, thus simply inducing mass moods of one kind or another. The effects of this process are significant, because feelings are both “stronger” than opinions and they are more attractive. Virilio calls this degeneration of politics the communism of affect.

The old totalitarianism once implemented “censorship”, but now we are faced with a new kind of “censorship”, as Bernard Noel says, one that occurs through the deprivation of meaning. That deprivation of meaning is not only a forgery, disguise or distortion of the “reality” around us, but it also offers a void filled with images and representations that replace thoughts while leaving an impression of fullness.

The French geo-political scientist Dominique Moïsi talks from a different perspective about the role of emotions in world politics in his new book *The Geopolitics of Emotions*. He argues that three emotions shape international politics: hope, humiliation, and fear. All three emotions are related to self-esteem. Hope is an expression of self-confidence, fear is a lack of self-belief, and humiliation is wounded self-esteem. Moïsi, based on what I believe to be a simplistic network of indicators (covering both political statements and architectural styles), concludes that Asia is dominated by a culture of hope, in Europe and America the culture of fear prevails, while the Middle East is mired in a culture of humiliation. According to Moïsi, Chindia (China + India) is the Asian engine of self-confidence, where 40% of the world’s population believe that today is better than yesterday, and that tomorrow will be even better. The West, on the other hand, lives in fear; Europe is scared of its recent terrible past (imperialism, the two World Wars, Nazism, Stalinism, the Holocaust) and the challenges of the future: what does Europe even represent?! The Americans, on the other hand, slowly losing their great supremacy, are not as concerned

with the European identity problem (“What are we?”) but with the question: “Why do they hate us?” The Arab World, at the same time, lives with the prevailing feeling of humiliation, a feeling of not being in control of one’s own life. That life without hope leads to despair and a destructive desire for revenge.

How can we oppose policies that manipulate people’s emotions? What is the answer to the notion that politics consists half of creating appearances and half of the art of getting people to believe those appearances? There is an old saying that we can turn to: “You can only understand the powerful if you look at their feet and not at their babbling mouths.”

Davor Mišković

# The Legacy of the Alternative: The Independent Scene

My generation in Croatia was marked by the 1990s because of the war, the changes of the system and all that went with that transformation with regard to ideology, the economy and politics. To speak of that heritage today is, for me, inseparable from my personal experience of living my twenties during the 1990s. Consequently, my perception of the heritage of independent projects in the 1990s is inevitably subjective, reliant on personal experience, which is (as they say) important not to overlook today when considering social phenomena and processes. We always see such things through the lens of our own experiences, the spaces we inhabit, the social structures, and the many other factors that may differ among people.

Connecting one's own experience – to which one might add also personal needs and interests – with that of the community and society we live in is one of the most important traits of independent culture. Independent culture programmes rarely aim to map things, create an objective classification of events, phenomena and processes. Instead, their programmes are subjective observations of that reality, something that is closer to the logic of an itinerary, a subjective observation of a journey or space one traverses. Maps are different in that they are objective views that reveal conventional points in space, and their importance is based on general agreement. Not going into how that agreement is reached, I believe maps to be an important guide, helping us step out of our subjective imprisonment. I hope that someone will map – and maybe they already have mapped – what was important in the 1990s so that it would be easier for us to determine today what it is that we inherited from those now, fortunately, faraway times. Until then, here is yet another not only subjective, but also rather limited view.

The 1990s actually began in the 1980s, or even much earlier, when the infrastructure needed for young people to enjoy their free time was created. It all started with the undermining of the authority of the king, emperor, Pope, or whoever it was who held power within a certain domain. From the very moment an opportunity to act in order to reorder society arose, there appeared those to whom such changes seemed insufficient or even harmful, pushing them to create a different view of things. These “ingrates” were mostly young people, I would say, predominantly because they have the least to lose since they have not yet gained something. Not merely in the sense of something tangible, material, but even more in the sense of social ties, they are in the process of creating their social networks and may choose to form them with those who are likeminded and share their revolutionary spark. Such dissatisfaction was expressed through new ideas of how to live, work, and develop social relations, which are all (of course) in the domain of culture and art.

The socialist baroque that transformed revolutionary ideas into the spectacle of abstract monuments and *slet*,<sup>1</sup> and moved them from the sphere of economic, social and political relations to the sphere of culture, left part of the youth in Yugoslavia discontented and ready to create alternatives. These alternatives were channelled into youth culture spaces with their own infrastructures, from actual spaces with production equipment to magazines and newspapers. In the 1990s that infrastructure fell apart in Croatia, but those who were unhappy with the ongoing radical social changes, who did not feel that things were changing for the better (as they were repeatedly told) did not disappear. They started searching for new forms of expression. And, they started demanding more radical changes, more democracy, more freedom, they

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1 *Slet* – a mass choreographed event in honour of the SFR Yugoslavia and its leader Josip Broz Tito, held on important national days. – *Translator’s note*

refused homogenisation based on ethnic identity and religion, they rejected the destruction of the working class, the transformation of social enterprises into state-owned ones, which paved the way to economic privatisation. Lacking an infrastructure that they could rely on, they adopted what they could from the dissolution of the previous infrastructure, started to adapt to social changes and claimed a position in civil society, something that also existed in the West, and thus started relying on democratisation, funding, human rights protection, and all the rest. From that they created a new infrastructure that helped them express alternative views of possible social progress. That infrastructure consisted of organisations, magazines and newspapers, art projects and festivals, as well as the occasional spaces that offered continuity for such forms of action.

Among those young ingrates there were many artists, contemporary artists to whom the new age was not favourable because it was fixed to a romanticised past. These were socially sensitive artists deeply disturbed by the suffering brought on by war and a social transformation that turned a blind eye to human neglect, and young artists who were sick of all that was happening and searching for a way out. Aesthetically, politically and ethically the new age sought to cut all ties with the recent past, to make it a mirage, to make people remember, as if by magic, only the bad days. It largely succeeded in this, primarily by directing what is said and how. All those who had happy days in the past felt guilty for such emotions, and turned to atoning for their sins in search of redemption by belonging to a society defined primarily through nation and religion. The voluntary participation of the majority of the people in this drama was interpreted differently, but it nevertheless appalled all those who perceived the new era as delirium, a disturbance in the form and content of society.

The 1990s alternative in Croatia was influenced by alternatives that preceded it, and was directed towards the idea of a more just, inclusive, and democratic society. Faced with the fact that most of society agreed to a democratically closed, exclusive and unjust society (as an alternative to the 1990s), the main question came to be interpreting this fact for the purposes of directing future actions. Herein, civil society became the basis of sorts for solidarity among people who interpreted reality differently and chose different forms of action. Civil society in the 1990s remained essentially filled with various ingrates and alternatives. It opposed the state, and advocated values and procedures that were significantly different from what was officially presented by the country. Today, however, civil society is mostly an extension of the state, a precarious part of the state apparatus, disciplined through formal procedures and the allocation of financial resources. I say mostly, because not everything is like that – within civil society there are still organisations that independently define their values, priorities and forms of action. However, it is different than in the 1990s, when the majority were like that.

### **The second half of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s brought the normalisation of what was achieved in the early 1990s.**

With some apologies and trials, the property that had been looted remained in the hands of those who stole it – the political, economic, cultural, academic and military elites that had formed and put down roots. For civil society this was a turning point. Was it better to try and remain in the early 1990s and... do what exactly? Or to accept normalisation and work on minor repairs? The part of civil society that primarily dealt with culture, which was under the strong influence of *Arkzin*, one of the most important interpreters of reality in the 1990s, decided on a strategy of connecting

different spaces and organisations, members of the former artistic and political alternative, into something that would become the independent cultural scene.

The independent scene positioned itself like a formalised citizens' cultural action towards the rest of society, and therefore as a part of civil society that works on minor repairs, responds to the needs of certain marginal groups, youth subcultures, alternatives. From the inside, it developed values, procedures and protocols which were autonomous in relation to the rest of society. And it held onto these values and protocols in its relationship with the rest of society. The hallmark of liberal democracy is the principled acceptance of all diversity, however compromised in practice. The independent scene nurtures the acceptance of diversity as a norm that is not compromised regardless of different actors and their preferences. In a formal sense it is also a feature of civil society overall, although the independent scene goes further than accepting diversity by building a decision-making system on joint actions and even financing, which incorporates every diversity into the decision-making process. This attitude towards diversity stood out in the midst of the rest of society and it is therefore possible to talk about a special value system. Of course, this does not mean that these same values are absent in the rest of society; fortunately, they are not, but in the independent scene they are the norm that permeates all relationships and processes, including the content that is produced.

It is for these reasons that the independent scene is perceived as a left-wing orientation and an extension of the alternative scenes of the 1980s and 1990s. In my opinion, this is true in relation to the content it produces and the forms of action, as well as the decision-making procedures. Even though there is a consensus within the independent scene in terms of valuing differ-

ence, social sensitivity and aversion to the privatisation of public resources, the ways in which these value positions are expressed is very different. That is why it is impossible to comprehend the independent scene in relation to particular aesthetic or political categories, except as a nebulous leftist orientation. How do you even define what an independent scene is? The answer stems from cultural policy, wherein it is defined through values (respect for minority rights, environmental standards, valuing creativity and individualism, advocacy of participatory decision-making models, etc.), work methods (collaborative models, interdisciplinarity, etc.), topics (the choice of which represents a reaction to social reality, the approach as a rule being active) and its relationship to time (modernity, i.e., determining the programme in terms of the contemporary social and cultural context). Therefore, the independent scene defines itself as a separate type of cultural activity that has its own rules of the game, and needs its own enactment infrastructure.

While the rest of society may still be apprehensive about the independent scene's role in cultural policy, it nevertheless occupies a necessary, previously destroyed space for the growth of youth culture. In addition, unlike the institutional cultural sector, it is used to projects and project financing, and due to lack of its own space of action it has occupied a number of decaying spaces and turned them into functional ones, as well as staging spectacles in public and institutional spaces. The agility, flexibility and innovation on which it rests in the field of cultural policy, born out of necessity, quickly began to be valued as something from which the entire cultural sector could learn and benefit. Hence its alliances with the institutional cultural sector, which the independent culture never saw as an enemy, but rather as its closest ally; the academic community and researchers who found an exciting subject of research; and politics, which saw in the independent

scene a factor whose stakes in the overall calculation seemed several magnitudes lesser than those held by institutions, and also perceived that it produced a lot that would not shake the existing order significantly, while demonstrating the openness and richness of cultural production.

Cultural politics are an unstable terrain, but for the most part they are engaged in defining the reasons for cultural production, what sort of culture we need, who it is aimed at and how it is produced. There are different paradigms in effect that justify the general existence of public financing of culture and cultural spaces, from socio-political to economic and psychological and therapeutic views. In the last twenty years or so, independent culture has survived all these paradigms and has persistently worked to create the conditions for its own survival. Its priorities of action in society are really related to its survival, realising ways to finance programmes and spaces for work. But this survival has one assumption – autonomy – a space in which it will manage to maintain its values, work methods and freedom of choice in terms of topics and forms of reflection on existing social phenomena and processes.

In order to uphold the existing level of autonomy, the independent scene in Croatia insists on concepts such as participatory management and decision-making, which actually means that it wants to sustain the right to decide for itself what it will do and how. It is truly independent if we understand independence as the right to choose one's own priorities of action. While today civil society has developed or, from my perspective, is collapsing, with the emergence and inclusion of actors who see only danger in diversity and advocate conservative values, the independent scene has proven to be resistant to these processes. It has been able to preserve diversity as a value by excluding those

whose diversity consists of opposing diversity. However, at the same time it has remained marginal in terms of its influence on society, the spaces it occupies and the finances it has at its disposal. Nevertheless, even though it has been marginalised in the last ten to fifteen years, it has served as a lever against further privatisation of public resources, especially in Zagreb, where it is strongest, and it has contributed to the formation of new political actors who are no longer marginal.

Much like the youth culture of the 1980s and the independent scene of the 2000s, the independent scene now exists like the Garden of Epicurus, on the fringes, offering alternatives, but rarely engaging in direct confrontations. Rarely, however, does not mean never, only that the battles are chosen carefully. Just like everyone who is rejected or despised is welcome in the Epicurean Garden, so the independent scene is made up of everything that is rejected, marginal, radical or simply new – in a word, different. Providing infrastructure for the different unavoidably brings the independent scene into contact with and under the influence of various policies that dominate society, and especially those policies that regulate civil society to which the independent scene nominally belongs. Today, these policies have given up on society as a whole, and are concentrated on users, people who need certain services and find them in the programmes of civil society organisations, which have, in turn, been transformed into specific, mainly social service providers, and due to the specifics of the independent scene within civil society, also providers of cultural content. The relationship between the user and service provider is formal, requiring some kind of contract, proof that the relationship is really happening. The independent scene has no users, but instead people who do something there, share opinions and follow programmes. Perceiving these people as users changes the nature of the relationship, turns collective action into a transaction between members of the

collective, common thinking into building human capacities, and the invitation to participate in an event into audience development.

This new speech, which has crawled and spread through cultural politics and civil society, individualises and subjectivises the public, common space, and is a reflection of the same paradigm that privatises public spaces. It seeks the classification of human relationships so that they can be measured, extracted and turned into a product. So far, the independent scene doesn't seem to have an answer to this situation, although comrades usually find a way.



Ana Panić

# The Creative Act as an Act of Resistance

Zoran Đinđić, PhD, Serbia's Prime Minister from 2000 to 2003 – the year he was killed in front of the Serbian government building, was an outstanding civil society theoretician and politician who recognised the importance of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the construction of civil society. He was also the first Prime Minister of Serbia to establish communication and cooperation with NGOs. His brilliant insight into the role of the civil sector was based on the notion that before democratic changes the role of NGOs was different to that of traditional NGOs, although typical for such organisations in undemocratic societies, thus implying a high degree of politicisation and focus on political themes.

Civil society barely existed in socialist Yugoslavia, because, according to Đinđić, there could be no vital civil society without a middle class that was financially independent and autonomous in terms of property, and thus not dependent on state administration positions. The absence of efficient communication in such a society was also a big problem, because mass manipulation was easy in a society wherein the media were the only method of communication. And the third important reason were historical crises that prompted people to seek solutions inside the state and to focus on a state they trusted, from which they expected to see solutions to problems through mechanisms such as the army, police, etc. This contrasts with societies that have enjoyed longer periods of freedom in which civil society manages to demonstrate its ability and capacity to self-organise and seek solutions to problems on its own.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Zoran Đinđić, "Uloga nevladinih organizacija u demokratskim društvima", *Saradnja nevladinog sektora i vlade*, Zbornik radova, ed. Dragan Golubović and Žarko Paunović (Belgrade: Centar za razvoj neprofitnog sektora; Washington, Budapest: The International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL); Belgrade: Građanske inicijative, 2004), 17-21.

During the wars of the 1990s, events from the past were instrumentalised as tools of mobilisation and “proof” that conflicts among peoples in this part of the world were eternal, unavoidable and even necessary.<sup>2</sup> Such new views of events from the past started in the late 1980s as ideological and psychological preparation for war. History was subjected to huge transformations, supranational communist ideas were replaced with a nationalist discourse, and the image of the other, neighbouring peoples became more ominous. All in all, a new history of conflicts was being written with the aim of changing, in a short period of time, the positive image of yesterday’s friend to today’s newfound enemy, and a strengthening of national identity and pride. “This newly produced history was supposed to prove that Serbs were always on the right side, that they never waged wars of conquest, that they were historical victors and that they did nothing to harm their neighbours.”<sup>3</sup> Victimisation became an important component of national identity, as did the production of memory regarding one’s own nation as a historical victim.<sup>4</sup>

It was precisely this anti-communist discourse and nationalism of the elite that were embodied by intellectuals who morphed into nationalists, whose commitment to democratic change was combined with demands for an independent nation-state. This is the point that brought about the polarisation of intellectuals and the formation of the Belgrade Circle – a group of Belgrade-based intellectuals who gathered all the “disappointed and critical voices” that openly fought against militarist politics, ethno-nationalism,

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2 Hrvoje Klasić, *Bijelo na crno. Lekcije iz prošlosti za budućnost* (Zagreb: Ljevak, 2019), 79.

3 Dubravka Stojanović, “U ogledalu ‘drugih’”, *Novosti iz prošlosti*, Zbornik radova, ed. Vojin Dimitrijević, (Belgrade: Beogradski centar za ljudska prava, 2010), 14.

4 Jasna Dragović-Soso, “Spasioci nacije”: *Intelektualna opozicija Srbije i oživljavanje nacionalizma* (Belgrade: Fabrika knjiga, 2004), 33.

populism, war crimes and ethnic cleansing on the territory of the former Yugoslavia. As Radomir Konstantinović noted, “The Belgrade Circle was established as a form of resistance to nationalism, which dominated the majority of Serbia’s consciousness, as well as the country’s intelligentsia. It was impossible and deeply humiliating to suffer nationalistic terror in silence. And finally, if they ask you what this Other Serbia is, give them a stern answer – it is a Serbia that does not put up with crime.”<sup>5</sup> In the same cult publication, *Druga Srbija – deset godina poslije (1992–2002)*, Ljubiša Rajić poses the question: “Who is going to create this different Serbia? It most certainly will not be the power structures that have tailored Serbia to suit their own needs, because a different or other Serbia it does not need. [Is it] the opposition that rehabilitates Nedić... the one that re-establishes Ljotić’s *Zbor*, the one that erects monuments to Draža Mihajlović; that seeks the comeback of Đujić? Their different Serbia would be even worse than this one.”<sup>6</sup> The words Laszlo Weigel contributed to the aforementioned book also apply to the present circumstances: “Long is the road from socialism to democracy, and short is the one to nationalism.”<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, Maja Korać finds the cause of the rise of nationalism among common folk, yesterday’s neighbours, in the unfinished socialist modernisation, and she explains the link between an urbanisation that was not followed by the integration of the rural population into the urban milieu, which ultimately reignited ethnic nationalism after the abolishment of state socialism, thus also activating the start of the crisis of the population’s

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5 Radomir Konstantinović, “Druga Srbija je Srbija koja se ne miri sa zločinom,” *Druga Srbija – deset godina posle (1992–2002)*, Zbornik radova, ed. Aljoša Mimica (Belgrade: Helsinški odbor za ljudska prava u Srbiji, 2002), 10–12.

6 Ibid., 84.

7 Ibid., 52.

personal and collective identity, fostering a sense of social and economic insecurity and loss of rootedness.<sup>8</sup> At the heart of it all was fear caused by deeply ingrained stereotypes. By recalling massacres and commemorating the victims of World War II, spirals of fear and violence were deliberately set in motion so that national difference prevailed over the ties between neighbours, old fears and suspicions were stirred, and neighbours turned into criminals. Everyday neighbourly relations remained peaceful as long as state policy was able to guarantee their stability. As soon as this was compromised, societies turned against each other, relapsed into crime and interethnic violence, and security was sought among one's own ethnic group by banishing Others – and these were the prerequisites of war and ethnic cleansing.<sup>9</sup>

Civil society, human rights and political organisations formed from the Belgrade Circle and around it, and not unintentionally coinciding with the work of the Circle (Humanitarian Law Center, Women in Black, Helsinki Committee for Human Rights) and their joint actions – ritual candle vigils (Nataša Kandić) and the Black Ribbon [*Crni flor*] civil resistance movement, which led hundreds of thousands of Belgrade residents to the streets in protest against the siege of Sarajevo – morphed into a black canvas on the streets of Belgrade.

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8 Maja Korać, *U potrazi za domom* (Belgrade: Zavod za udžbenike, 2012), 60–61.

9 Ksavije Bugarel, *Bosna. Anatomija rata* (Belgrade: Fabrika knjiga, 2004), 118–142.

*Violence had reached such proportions that it was impossible to locate or understand culture otherwise than as an act of anti-war engagement, as a part of human rights.*  
(Borka Pavićević)<sup>10</sup>

Art, activism and the civil sector started to merge, its agents addressing problems in society by creating an anti-war history of sorts, which always remains on the margins of the grand history of war, through the political, engaged dimension of art, and political, anti-war and art activism.

When they asked Nikola Džafo – artist and founder of the Led Art Group (1992–2002), which was based on the idea of freezing art in anticipation of better times – why he stopped painting at the start of the 1990s, he answered: “Because it is impertinent for an artist to deal with his own personal problems in wartime.”<sup>11</sup>

In Serbia, it is important to recognise the work of NGOs, citizens’ associations, intellectual and artistic circles that played a leading role in remembrance. Being opposed to wars during the 1990s, they were constantly questioning, challenging and contesting the monopolisation of memory and official historiography by leading institutionalised groups. They were committed to including “negative memories” and critical remembrance culture as opposed to selective memory.

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10 *Umjetnici u egzilu* (Zagreb: Centar za mirovne studije, 2014), 3. Accessed: 1/12/2022. Available online: [https://www.cms.hr/system/publication/pdf/30/umjetnici\\_u\\_egzilu\\_final.pdf](https://www.cms.hr/system/publication/pdf/30/umjetnici_u_egzilu_final.pdf)

11 Led Art regrouped in 2002 to become the Multimedia Centre “Led Art”– Art Clinic in response to a sick society, based on the utopian idea that art can cure and change the world. Accessed: 1/12/2022. Available online: <https://cargocollective.com/testament/LED-ART>

Interestingly, it was the Museum of Yugoslavia, as an institution that for a long time operated as an independent federal organisation outside the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Culture, or any other ministry, that offered an institutional framework for projects and artists who expressed their active and/or critical attitude towards society. The space of the museum offered different perspectives and a wide range of themes which were the focus of artists engaged in recontextualising a shared past. As early as 2001, the Museum of Yugoslavia opened its doors to an exhibition produced by the Centre for Cultural Decontamination titled *Dossier Serbia. Assessing the Reality of the 90s: The Endgame*, which had seen its debut in Vienna a year earlier. The building of the “25 May” Museum was chosen because of its symbolic importance for both the exhibition and the play *A Brothel of Warriors*, also produced by the Centre in the same year, as part of the BITEF festival. Director Ana Miljanić guided the audience through an empty museum of a discarded Yugoslav past, presenting the dismantling of a supranational Yugoslav identity, and its replacement with a national Serbian one. These were followed by environmental installations by Nikola Rikanović, *Butterfly Superman*, dedicated to the assassinated prime minister Zoran Đinđić in 2004. The museum of a non-existent state, founded in 1996, barely five years after the country’s disintegration in Europe’s bloodiest war in the second half of the twentieth century – a war powered by the idea of sweeping all undesirable heritage under the carpet – was often under the radar of the state, whose primary focus was national museums, and thus it was in a sense guaranteed a certain amount of autonomy. What follows is a list of several activist initiatives and civil society organisations that collaborated with artists, or which were moved into action by artists themselves, and which survived the transition. These initiatives and organisations remain relevant, because they were able to transform, find different sources of funding (even receive financial support for certain projects from the state), and thus remain noteworthy and of use to society to this day.

Presentation of the exhibition *Listen, Little Man* directed by Ana Miljanić, for the exhibition *The Nineties: A Glossary of Migrations*, Museum of Yugoslavia, 2019. Photo: Nemanja Knežević

In accordance with the best traditions of the theatre of the oppressed and especially the invisible theatre, Ana Miljanić directed a dozen actions that took place in different parts of the city over the course of one day, hourly (from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m.). Exhibition: *The Nineties: A Glossary of Migrations*, Museum of Yugoslavia, 2019. Photo: Nemanja Knežević

**The Centre for Cultural Decontamination (CZKD)** is a non-profit cultural institution whose work is based on critical thinking, and cultural and art production. Established at the time of war and transitional destruction, the Centre has been able to develop into an institution of resistance. It opened with *The First Decontamination* on 1 January 1995, rooted in the notion that nationalism, xenophobia and other forms of violence can be cross-examined through culture, art and public speech. Since then, the Centre has been an institution for critical thinking and the affirmation of the right to rebellion, without drawing lines between



human rights and justice, and art, culture and the truth. Since its founding, the Centre has organised several thousand different programmes and remained a place of political and cultural dialogue, a public space of simultaneous criticism and affirmation.<sup>12</sup>

The **Group 484** is a non-profit, non-governmental organisation that empowers enforced migrants (refugees, internally displaced persons, asylum seekers) to actively partake in exercising their rights, and it supports local, particularly youth populations to accept and respect difference. It was founded in 1995 to support the self-organisation of 484 families that had sought refuge from Krajina (Croatia) to Serbia in the aftermath of the Croatian military campaign “Storm”. The Group was founded by Jelena Šantić (1944–2000), prima ballerina, writer and activist, who brought together individuals dedicated to providing humanitarian, psychosocial, legal and informational assistance to refugees. The first years of the Group’s existence were marked by direct work with refugees and parallel empowerment of members of the Group and the organisation as a whole. The scope of activities was gradually expanded through educational and research work, and cooperation with decision-makers with the aim of finding systemic solutions to the problems of forced migration and migration in general. The Group

The corner dedicated to Group 484 at the exhibition *The Nineties: A Glossary of Migrations*, Museum of Yugoslavia, 2019. Photo: Nemanja Knežević



12 Source of data: the website of the Centre for Cultural Decontamination. Accessed: 1/12/2022. Available online: <https://www.czkd.org/o-nama/>



Vesna Pavlović, *Return*, filming of a documentary video with Women in Black and Dragan Protić Prota from Škart at the locations of the former collective accommodation centres in Mala Krsna, Mikulja and Pančevo, 2019. Photo: Ana Panić

484 has worked with over 100,000 users in more than 70 cities in Serbia, and has initiated and participated in various regional programmes.<sup>13</sup>

Unlike the Centre for Cultural Decontamination, **Women in Black** are a group of feminists and antimilitarist activist from Serbia who have been active since 1991, primarily with street actions. They made “visible non-violent resistance to militarism, war, sexism, nationalism. In short, all aspects of violence and discrimination against women and all those ethnically, religiously, culturally, sexually, ideologically different.”<sup>14</sup> They have also founded the Women’s Peace Network – Network of Women in Black in Serbia, produced alternative women’s histories, they write *others* into history and organise continuing peace education. They are persistent in their calls for accountability in terms of the war and war crimes in Yugoslavia, for trials for all those suspected of war crimes at The Hague tribunal, as well as for confronting the issue of collective moral and political responsibility. They do so with street actions, petitions, campaigns, through presences at commemorations, seminars and conferences. The group consists of women, as well as men, of different generations and ethnicities, levels of education, social status, lifestyles and sexual choices. They instigated a public, non-violent anti-war protest on 9 October 1991 in Belgrade, and so far they have organised over 2,300 street actions. In addition, their aesthetics of resistance involves other art-activist practices: photographs, posters, exhibitions, publications, theatre performances, video activism, t-shirts, scarves, badges, stickers, etc. They continue to create their anti-war aesthetics in solidarity with art collectives such as Škart, Dah Teatar, and Led Art/Art Clinic. They wear



13 *The Nineties: A Glossary of Migrations*, exhibition catalogue, eds. Ana Panić and Simona Ognjanović (Belgrade: Museum of Yugoslavia, 2019), 307.

14 *Ibid.*, 315.

black because of the death of all the victims of war and violence, and above all the victims of crimes committed in our name. Black, the colour of mourning and loss, imposed on women by patriarchal tradition, is utilised by Women in Black as a means of expressing their dissent from the dominant culture of death. They chose silence as an act of condemnation and disagreement with the war, refusing to speak superfluous words. They chose silence because they lacked the words to express their indignation towards crimes, and because silence marked the lives of most citizens. The silence of women is a sign of deep oppression. By playing with deep-rooted patriarchal values, they deconstruct the patriarchal order.<sup>15</sup>

By drawing attention to specific civil society organisations, which were presented for the first time in an institution at the exhibition *The Nineties: A Glossary of Migrations*, held at the Museum of Yugoslavia from December 2019 to March 2020, we wish to show the artistic and activist heritage, anti-war counter-narratives and the pacifist, artistic and cultural counter-public of the decade. The term “counter-public” is used by Milena Dragičević Šešić to show the connections between civil society organisations, artists and art collectives, independent media and intellectual circles that operated outside organised platforms as an artistic dissident alternative scene in the 1990s.<sup>16</sup> All the mentioned NGOs, as well as some that today no longer have the importance they had during the 1990s or the first decade of the 2000s (or in fact no longer even exist), were an important social factor because they focused on the sore points of society and thus contributed to a more reflective attitude towards historical mythmaking, facing crimes for which members of our group are responsible. Ultimately, this is the only way to oppose the idea of collective guilt that is dominant in pub-



Vesna Pavlović, *Return*, filming of the documentary video with Women in Black and Dragan Protić Prota (Škart) at the locations of the former collective accommodation centres in Mala Krsna, Mikulja and Pančevo, 2019. Photo: Ana Panić

15 Ibid.

16 Milena Dragičević Šešić, *Umetnost i kultura otpora* (Belgrade: Institut za pozorište, film, radio i televiziju, Fakultet dramskih umetnosti i Clio), 2018.



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 Realised with the solidarity of: Grupo activista por la paz – Santa Marta, Extremadura, Spain; Donne associazione per la pace, Italy; Mujeres para la salud, Valencia; Rete di iniziative contro la guerra, Padua  
 Exhibition: *The Nineties: A Glossary of Migrations*, Museum of Yugoslavia, 2019. Photo: Nemanja Knežević

lic discourse, and to come closer to reconciliation with the other side in order to create a healthy and strong civil society.





Documentary memories (1 drawing + 1 text) by women refugees from the wars on the territory of Bosnia and Croatia about their pre-war coexistence and the last traces of peace, collected by the activist field work of Women in Black in the refugee camps of Mala Krsna, Kobilovo and Mikulja during 1994. The memories were collected in the book of the same name, printed with money collected by street sale actions by members of "fellow fighters" in Italy and Spain.



Vladimir Vidmar

# Case Study: Janja Žvegelj's Squash as the "Real Allegory" of the 1990s

The Škuc Gallery's long history involves several sore points marking key transformative moments in the history of the Yugoslav and Slovenian art scene. The first milestone coincides with the gallery's founding: the late 1970s were the last days of the heroic end of neo-avant-garde Yugoslav art, with the introduction of historicism and eclectic art in the 1980s. The opening of the Škuc Gallery in 1978 as part of the Student Cultural Centre reflects this very clearly: the gallery's opening ceremony included an exhibition by OHO, a Slovenian conceptual group that was active in the late 1960s and early 1970s. By that time, OHO had already stopped producing art and decided to work on connecting art with life, a project they carried out by establishing the Šempas commune. Škuc exhibited OHO's work after the group's disintegration, thereby indicating its own interest in the heritage of progressive avant-garde practices and their influence on Yugoslav conceptualism. Symbolically, the opening of the gallery marked the end of the neo-avant-garde and was a prequel to the 1980s.

The life of the Škuc Gallery during the dynamic 1980s was on the one hand marked by the constant intersection of Yugoslav conceptual artistic practices from different parts of the country and shows by a new generation of Slovenian painters and sculptors, while, on the other hand, the gallery also created a space for subculture. The gallery space at Stari trg 21, where it operates to this day, was at the centre of subculture experimentation in the visual arts, video, music and publishing, where distinguished individuals from different fields collaborated closely. The activities were socially engaged and progressive, explicitly critical, but rarely directly confrontational with respect to the disintegrating Yugoslav socialist system, which was tolerant towards this work. Progressive cultural activity proved to be very effective in creating a new audience and in attracting many people interested in contemporary culture to the gallery. Crucially, Škuc saw its function as

a social space. A movement that was closely linked to Škuc and key to creating a new audience through joining culture and politics was *Neue Slowenische Kunst* (NSK). Their project introduced a new cultural context by critically questioning the collective modus and system of action that contributed significantly to the reconfiguration of the social and artistic arena. Regardless of the unsurpassed intensity of such cultural events, during the 1980s the Škuc Gallery operated almost entirely without the financial support of any official authority. Apart from acquiring the space, the activities of the gallery were based primarily on the enthusiastic volunteer work of the more or less permanent gallery staff and artists. It is important to highlight this for the sake of emphasising the specific structure of Škuc compared to the Student Cultural Centres in Zagreb and Belgrade, and to highlight the subsequent clear turning point in the gallery's history, which occurred in the 1990s and is the subject of this case study.

Our interest here is the gradual transformation of Škuc from a largely unsupported centre with loose organisational principles, dedicated to a spectrum of artistic experiments in the fields of the visual arts, video, music and publishing, into a professionally functioning contemporary art space whose staff has clearly defined roles and a more coherent curatorial programme. This transformation occurred in the 1990s, and it should be analysed in relation to the radical changes that befell the socio-economic system and which led to Slovenia's newfound independence and the development of its institutions and (cultural) politics, at the same time taking into consideration the wider regional and international context.

## **NEW CULTURAL POLICIES, NEW INSTITUTIONAL MODELS**

Parallel with the then epochal ideological transition to a new, single nation-state with an economic basis in a free market, changes also occurred in the field of cultural politics. While socialist Yugoslavia supported its cultural scene(s) and institutions by following a social-democratic model of state regulation, the 1990s saw several attempts at the liberalisation of cultural politics. Despite this, the cultural politics of the 1990s seem to have been in constant fluctuation between the desire for the transgression of instrumentalising culture as an ideological battleground, and the need of the newly established nation-state to legitimise itself by constructing a national culture narrative. Maja Breznik has thus far produced the most comprehensive analysis of this aspect of Slovenian cultural politics. The root of the problem, according to Breznik, is the unclear formulation of “public interest” in the versions of the Act on the Realisation of Public Interest in Culture from 1994 and 2002. While public interest was formerly only technically explained by listing goals, the Act ultimately determined it to be of state interest, naming civil society as a partner of the state in the process. In practice this meant that civil society representatives were somewhat randomly invited and called on to participate in decision-making processes in various committees, and capriciously instrumentalised by the state in the process of legitimising the functioning of a young Slovenian democracy. This became even more conspicuous with the Act on Culture, which made a clear distinction between public institutions and public cultural programmes: the former are financed regularly and fully, while the latter have to reapply for financing each three or four years in order to receive partial funding. Simply put, the outlines of the Slovenian cultural scene of the 1990s were as follows: on the one hand, public institutions continued to function structurally more or less unchanged in the wider

area of the state (or municipalities), while other segments of the cultural scene (associations and private institutions) represented the civil sector and were invited by the state to play a given part and partake in (therefore, legitimise) the democratic ritual.

Regarding the Škuc Gallery, which obviously falls into the second category of the Slovenian cultural scene dichotomy, changes in cultural politics nevertheless meant that it could apply for and was guaranteed more or less permanent funding, which had been impossible to achieve in the previous decade, since Yugoslav legislation mostly inhibited the establishment of associations and independent institutions. Steady financing, new legislation and (although often only symbolic) participation in the creation of cultural policies played a crucial role in the rearticulation of the gallery's in-house dynamics, aims and range, albeit only partially of its structure. Alenka Pirman, who took over the gallery in 1992, initiated its transformation from a "cultural centre" to a "gallery space". In other words, the space itself was redefined. What had once been a social space that mixed the cultural contents of a bookshop, vintage shop, exhibition venue and bar, was gradually being reshaped into a "serious" exhibition venue. One of the more determined moves in this direction was eliminating the bar that had operated as part of the gallery space, making it a popular meeting point, even if with a shabby, bohemian aura of an alternative hangout. This transformation was undertaken by the art director of the gallery in the early 1990s, the aforementioned Alenka Pirman, whose organisational spirit and determination to make the gallery's activities more relevant and transparent marked the first phase of Škuc's transition from an alternative hub to a white cube. The changes introduced by Pirman were primarily focused on the organisational, logistical and financial aspects of Škuc's operations. Pirman (herself an artist) did not venture into decisive curatorship. The art selection process thus remained fairly "democratic", including very diverse artistic

approaches. Despite her “curatorial reserve”, Pirman understood very well that the overall infrastructure for a new, contemporary artistic paradigm in Slovenia was not yet established. She was therefore very active in starting and organising numerous initiatives that were extremely beneficial to the local scene. One of the most important things she did during her term in Škuc was set up the World of Art School for Critics and Curators, which remains to this day the only course in the country offering specialisation in the field of contemporary art. Pirman was aware that the optimism of the early 1990s should be directed towards laying healthy foundations for Slovenian contemporary culture.

What Alenka Pirman did for the Škuc Gallery (and the Slovenian contemporary art scene in general) in terms of organisation, her successor Gregor Podnar achieved in terms of curatorship. Having studied in Germany, Podnar was the first protagonist of the Slovenian art scene to receive specific training in contemporary art (since most local curators graduated in art history at the then extremely conservative Art History Department at the Faculty of Arts in Ljubljana). Podnar very confidently took on the process of bringing the gallery closer to what was happening abroad by introducing new professions (contemporary art curator, gallerist) as well as new artistic practices and approaches. Without hesitation, he set a firm programme direction for Škuc, at the same time skilfully giving it consistency by connecting it with Škuc’s own exhibition history. Neo-conceptualism, in its countless forms, was the common denominator of the late 1990s, but Podnar was aware of its many reference points in Škuc’s past. These included Škuc’s inaugural exhibition of the romantic conceptualist group OHO, the numerous exhibitions of Croatian, Serbian and Bosnian protagonists of the so-called New Art Practice of the 1980s, and Pirman’s presentations in the early 1990s of the young generation of Slovenian artists who wanted to distance themselves from both the New Image Painting

and the alternative of the previous decade. Podnar also wanted to promote the socially aware, dialogical and participatory dimensions of progressive artistic practices of the 1990s. Taking an openly active role in the conceptualisation and production of art projects and exhibitions, Podnar played – alongside Igor Zabel and Zdenka Badovinac from Moderna galerija – an essential role in introducing the curatorial turn and adapting it to suit the art scene in Slovenia. This included a distinctly international gallery programme, which coincided with the great interest the international contemporary art circles had in the artistic production of the region. Opening up to international art circles was characterised, in turn, by the internalisation of new phenomena and contemporary art world protocols through new networks, the establishment of multicultural cooperation, the crossing of borders and the exploration of new “identities”. According to Igor Zabel, this was the time when the region confronted the old story of the exhausted “high art”, seeking exotic primary energies located on the periphery, which the art world had not yet fully moulded and professionalised. In the second half of the 1990s, the Škuc Gallery thus brought about its “big turn” to the paradigm of contemporary art.

## **SQUASH: A CASE STUDY**

What makes Janja Žvegelj’s *Squash* project exceptional is not that it is symptomatic or representative of the most progressive tendencies in 1990s Slovenian art, but rather the fact that it is at the same time critical of the paradigm it represented and self-ironic in its unavoidable complacency with the system.

The event took place in March 1998 at the Škuc Gallery, and involved a game of squash between the artist and the gallery’s artistic director Gregor Podnar. One of the gallery’s long rooms was converted into a squash court, in front of which there

was a spectator stand. The event was filmed and broadcast on a TV monitor placed in one of the gallery's windows giving on the street. Mounted on a wall was a board for the players to keep score, and there was also a cup for the winner. The event began with an opening speech by Igor Zabel, chief curator of Moderna galerija, Slovenia's principle institution of modern and contemporary art. Together with Moderna galerija's director Zdenka Badovinac, Zabel played a key role in making Moderna one of the eminent institutions in Europe with its reflexive and critical approach to contemporary art. Zabel also symbolically ended the event by presenting the winner with the cup.

*Squash*, an emblematic project of the most progressive Slovenian art of the 1990s, consisted of a match between the artist and the curator, accompanied by an interpretation by a critic (in the role of a commentators). What is immediately obvious is a certain literal directness in the way this proverbial opposition in contemporary art is dealt with; the difference in power positions was to be "legitimised" with the outcome of the match, friendly and playful, but nevertheless a competition, which Podnar won. Broaching also the issue of the institutional framework in his introductory speech, Zabel, as a critic, affirmed this difference by presenting the award to Podnar. The work seems to try and offer a new diagram of power to condense the reflection on the art system at its point of transition to a new paradigm. But such an interpretation would only scratch the surface of reading this work.

One of the key things said about *Squash* was Igor Zabel's introductory text, published in the Škuc annual catalogue in 1998. He referred to the project as "the transfer of reality into realism" twice, only partially explaining this idea by talking about the gallery transforming "into a non-gallery space, but in a way that it remains a gallery, while the squash court is – despite its reality – mimesis, a

painting”. This is an important aspect of Janja Žvegelj’s work, especially in the context of the practice of institutional critique, which curatorial discourses often attribute to her. Suggestive of the 1990s and in sharp contrast to the 1980s, institutional critique was not articulated here as a systematic critique of ideology, but rather in the form of a question the artist asked herself: how a critical position could be formulated from a position within the system. Compared to NSK’s radical and systemic institutional critique in the 1980s, aimed at the system and its wider political and ideological implications from an “outside” antagonistic position, here things were much more muddled. While NSK formed an autonomous parallel system through its strategies of over-identification, Janja Žvegelj and her generation approached institutional critique from the other side. While NSK were antagonists of the system, Žvegelj’s generation found itself in the uncomfortable position of being the representatives of a new paradigm to which the system now wanted to adapt. This was the source of the project’s directness: with the physical presence of the artist and curator in the foreground, there was no place for distance and reserve there. Everyone was involved.

A parallel may be drawn with the institutional transformation of the Škuc Gallery: from a marginal, outsider position without stable funding or institutional support, often in a difficult (if not outright confrontational) relationship with the authorities to a state-funded, professionally run gallery. While previously an alternative subculture hub, Škuc was now financed as a part of the growing network of art spaces, and occasionally invited to take part in decision-making processes regarding cultural politics. In a way, the new democratic state institutionally reinvented Škuc as a counterpart of its own self, as an official part of civil society. The fates of the new generation of artists in the 1990s and Škuc may be compared in this context. While artists like Janja Žvegelj recognised art institutions as key players in critical and reflective con-

temporary art, the absence of a constructive cultural politics prevented her and others from ever being able to live off their work, forcing them into increasingly insecure and flexible positions within the system. At the same time, the country's recognition of independent art spaces like Škuc led to their financial dependence and an increasingly servile attitude towards the demands of an increasingly neoliberal logic imposed on the local cultural scene.

There is yet another important implication of *Squash* that is relevant to the context of 1990s Slovenian art, even though it is more of a formal nature and stems from Zabel's emphasis on Žvegelj's transfer of reality to realism. Namely, *Squash* represents a very specific and subtle attempt at institutional critique which originates from a real, contested position of the artist and which has more to do with self-criticism than exposing the system. The issue of articulating this criticism without succumbing to the conventions of the art system is addressed in the self-mocking and ironic *mise-en-scène* of the game, which the artist willingly entered. And in this respect, this has less to do with challenging the established positions of power, and more to do with exploring the artist's way of inquiry. At this level, Žvegelj's victory is irrelevant to change. The project is a self-reflection, a concise consideration of the possibility of formulating a critique of a system that anticipates, welcomes and neutralises any possibility of subversion. Moreover, it exploits our attempts to violate it, making constant defiance an imperative, or *modus operandi*. It is precisely this *perpetuum mobile* of criticism and transgression that feeds our creativity, flexibility and productivity in reproducing the system we want to destroy.

Realism is often perceived as the intention to depict reality or the "outside" world as accurately and precisely as possible. However, we need to remember that the most programmatic image of artistic realism, Gustave Courbet's *The Painter's Studio*, is

actually an allegory, as Courbet himself pointed out in the subtitle “A real allegory”. The realism that Zabel mentions (and never fully elaborates) in connection with Žvegelj’s work is not one based on the metaphysical binary of inner and outer. The “real allegory” oxymoron does what oxymora do best: it implies paradox. The paradox is that what is outside is also part of what is inside, like squash in the gallery – something ambivalent, at the same time completely out of place and strangely appropriate. This paradox is also contemporary art’s trauma, which in the paradigmatic 1990s turned to what is outside, what is on the street, in life, the quotidian, politics, as opposed to the inside view, the interior of the gallery, or insider expertise attributed to modernism. In this way, Žvegelj’s *Squash* addresses her inner limits, her naivety and the prejudices of looking outside. It would be completely wrong to conclude from this that Žvegelj advocates some form of introspection: no, she is offering a warning against the dangers of such reductions. Naive reliance on what is outside (oneself, the gallery, art) may actually result in the uncritical transmission of what we find there into art, the transmission of the ideological positions that are being served, no matter how fresh and emancipatory they may seem at first glance. I think this is *Squash*’s emphatic warning: fleeing from one ideology, we have uncritically adopted the principles of another. Moreover, we have identified with it to such an extent that we no longer see any way forward, we are playing a game whose outcome is utterly unimportant: any result is a legitimisation. It is not difficult to see how this determined the range of contemporary art’s influence as a paradigm and its stalemate position, and clear parallels for this can also be found in the cultural politics manoeuvres of the time, as discussed above. This concise consideration of the intertwining of “inside” and “outside” as a profound trauma of both contemporary art and the paradigm of critique is the central point of Žvegelj’s project. Not long after *Squash*, Janja Žvegelj decided to stop being an artist. In

2000, the curatorial team of Manifesta, which took place in Ljubljana that year, invited her to submit a project proposal, to which she replied (in my view ironically) that she had no inspiration. This was her last artistic statement to date. Nonetheless, instead of interpreting this as an act of defeatism, we should look upon it as a rejection of the insider position, regardless of the impossibility of the outsider one, and as a radical leap into the abyss of the impossibility-of-not-being-me.

As Žižek writes:

It may appear that one cannot act today, that all we can really do is just state things. But in a situation like today's, to state what is can be much stronger than calls to action, which are as a rule just so many excuses not to do anything. Let me quote Alain Badiou's provocative thesis: "It is better to do nothing than to contribute to the invention of formal ways of rendering visible that which Empire already recognizes as existent." Better to do nothing than to engage in localized acts whose ultimate function is to make the system run more smoothly (acts like providing space for the multitude of new subjectivities, etc.). The threat today is not passivity, but pseudo-activity, the urge to "be active," to "participate" to mask the Nothingness of what goes on. People intervene all the time, "do something," while academics participate in meaningless "debates," and so on, and the truly difficult thing is to step back, to withdraw from all this. Those in power often prefer even a "critical" participation, an exchange of whatever kind, to silence – just in order to engage us in a "dialogue," to make sure our ominous passivity is broken.<sup>1</sup>

Here we cannot avoid drawing comparisons not only with the practices of contemporary art, which in their determined activity institutionally legitimise the 1990s, but more specifically

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1 Slavoj Žižek, available at: [https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/2340358.Slavoj\\_Zizek?page=20](https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/2340358.Slavoj_Zizek?page=20) , accessed 20 January 2023.

with the emergence of civil society as a partner of the state in the ritual called democracy. The reinvention of civil society in the 1990s meant a new chapter in the legitimisation of the new system in an unusual choreography of “participation”, “active” citizenship, and “dialogue”, wherein the new structural place was to a large extent filled with the cultural scene and its initiatives. Maybe it’s time that instead of a pseudo-active, allegedly critical “yes”, the other side – however it may be conceived – hears a “no” from us.

To Žižek again:

Perhaps, one should assert this attitude of passive aggressivity as a proper radical political gesture, in contrast to aggressive passivity, the standard “interpassive” mode of our participation in socio-ideological life in which we are active all the time in order to make it sure that nothing will happen, that nothing will really change. In such a constellation, the first truly critical (“aggressive”, violent) step is to WITHDRAW into passivity, to refuse to participate – Bartleby’s “I would prefer not to” is the necessary first step which as it were clears the ground for a true activity, for an act that will effectively change the coordinates of the constellation.<sup>2</sup>

*Squash* is about the idea that contemporaneity cannot be established as a relevant and critical position by searching for an optimal form of reactivity to our present. The latter inevitably leads to what we find in our present becoming our sole horizon. At the same time, it is good to keep in mind Zabel’s words about the transition from reality to realism: it is the realism of Courbet’s programmatic painting that is the real allegory, that is, realism which in the spirit of Lacan’s concept of the real relativizes the conventional polarisation of reality and fiction. This realism is not what faithfully reflects, contemplates on or intervenes in reality,

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2 Slavoj Žižek, “The Obscenity of Human Rights: Violence as Symptom”. Available at: <https://www.lacan.com/zizviol.htm>.

but that in which – according to Miklavž Komelj – the fictional structure of this reality becomes apparent. And for this reason contemporaneity as a critical position cannot be reduced to its present. Giorgio Agamben also warns against this:

Those who are truly contemporary, who truly belong to their time, are those who neither perfectly coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands. They are thus in this sense irrelevant [*inattuale*]. But precisely because of this condition, precisely through this disconnection and this anachronism, they are more capable than others of perceiving and grasping their own time. Naturally, this noncoincidence, this ‘dys-chrony,’ does not mean that the contemporary is a person who lives in another time, a nostalgic who feels more at home in Athens of Pericles or in the Paris of Robespierre and the marquis de Sade than in the city and the time in which he lives. An intelligent man can despise his time, while knowing that he nevertheless irrevocably belongs to it, that he cannot escape his own time. Contemporariness is, then, a singular relationship with one’s own time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it. More precisely, it is that *relationship with time that adheres to it through a disjunction and an anachronism*. Those who coincide too well with the epoch, those who are perfectly tied to it in every respect, are not contemporaries, precisely because they do not manage to see it; they are not able to firmly hold their gaze on it.<sup>3</sup>

Jože Barši, Janja Žvegelj’s professor at the Ljubljana Academy of Fine Arts and also an artist himself, reached a similar conclusion when reflecting on another of her works. He also believes that contemporary works have, or at least should have, a problem with the moment of which they are supposedly part. They are

3 Giorgio Agamben, “What is the Contemporary?”, p. 41. Available at: <http://arthistorome.uniroma2.it/images/Agamben-copia.pdf>.

either ignored or dismissed. Their contemporariness often shows precisely in the fact that we do not recognise them as contemporary. They are excluded, they do not count, at least not until they are taken into account. Contemporaneity is, according to Barši, like something that does not completely belong to its present. A disagreement of sorts with the present time. Modernity, therefore, is a special relationship to one's own time that both accepts it and distances itself from it. In short: what affects our time is what is contemporary, and thus also current. Moreover, the agency of such a work or practice never stops, regardless of when the artwork was created. The degree of contemporaneity of such a work depends on this time of agency – on the effect it has on (its) time. Caravaggio's *Madonna of Loreto*, although painted in the late Renaissance, could be said to be a modern work of art. The image has its effect on the present, and also has a certain potential for the future. Its strength depends on the duration of this effect.

Natalija Vujošević

# The Cetinje Biennial – Lost in the Mirage of Transition\*

The Cetinje Biennial was an international exhibition of contemporary art organised over the course of fifteen years, in five editions: 1991, 1994, 1997, 2002, and 2005. The idea to launch the biennial is tied to the year 1989, when Nikola Petrović officially came to Montenegro for the first time as a descendant of the former King Nikola Petrović. The event was linked to the ceremony of returning the mortal remains of his family from France to Montenegro. On the occasion, Nikola Petrović was invited by Montenegrin officials and the city of Cetinje to propose a project that could be developed in Montenegro, and his response to this invitation was the idea of launching a large international exhibition of contemporary art in Cetinje.

We all know what 1989 was like in Montenegro: after half a year of the so-called anti-bureaucratic revolution protests, the biggest rally was held in Titograd on 11 January 1989, which, according to some sources, gathered around 30,000 citizens. Following this event, the former communist leadership resigned and a new leadership was elected, supporting the policies of Slobodan Milošević. October 1989 saw the organisation of the ceremonial return of the mortal remains of King Nikola and Queen Milena from France, and their burial in Cetinje.

In November 1989 the Berlin Wall fell.

And thus in his text about the future biennial, Nikola Petrović mentioned the events that inspired the launch of this project – the transfer of the remains of King Nikola on 1 October 1989 and the historic event that occurred a month later – the demolition of the Berlin Wall.

He writes about the future biennial as follows:

This will be the first international biennial of contemporary

\*Source of Information – The Archive of Cetinje Biennial/ACB

art in the “East”. It is the expression of an irresistible desire that drives us: to express human and cultural values, the only thing that can unite us at a time when, in the Balkans as elsewhere, nationalistic passions are ablaze. And it will be a great festivity, completely original, in a wonderful space that has yet to be discovered. One of the first benefits is the perspective of a new Europe, its dynamics that move us, the dynamics of hope and desire. It is also Yugoslavia, the land of hospitality, the crossroads of East and West, North and South. Yugoslavia, which with its mosaic of people seems to summarise the hopes and conflicts of the new European geography.

## **The 1st Cetinje Biennial – Biennial Intro: East/West**

Preparations for the exhibition began in 1990, with the association of the Cetinje Biennial being established. Besides artists and art historians, its members also included acting Montenegrin politicians – the then President of Montenegro Momir Bulatović, the Republic’s Secretary for Culture, Education and Sports, as well as heads of all religious communities, among others. The Biennial was supported by the Yugoslav Fund for Culture, under the auspices of the Federal Government and the Republic of Montenegro, alongside sponsors.

Nikola Petrović invited truly interesting collaborators to organise the exhibition. The General Secretary of the biennial was Pontus Hultén, one of the founders of the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris and the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) in Los Angeles, and also the creator of the legendary and then still operating Institute for Advanced Studies in Plastic Arts. Crucially, he was a reformer of museum organisation, shifting it towards an elastic form of interdisciplinarity and participation.

The commissioner of the international selection was Jean-Hubert Martin, the art historian and curator who planned the *Magiciens de la Terre* (Magicians of the Earth) exhibition at the Centre Pompidou in 1989. According to Martin, this was the first international exhibition to gather a group of artists, half of whom were from the West, with the other half from the rest of the world.



*Airplane for Culture*, 2nd Cetinje Biennial, 1994  
© Archive of Cetinje Biennials

In addition to the main commissioners, the exhibition also involved Yugoslav commissioners, namely Irina Subotić, Petar Ćuković and Lidija Merenik.

The biennial was planned as a large-scale exhibition presenting the works of thirty Yugoslav and thirty international artists. The artist list included names such as Rebecca Horn, Thomas Schütte, Christian Boltanski, Janis Kunelis, and Daniel Buren, among many others. However, with the deterioration of the situation in Yugoslavia and increasingly

violent rhetoric, twenty-five artists of the confirmed thirty refused to participate in the exhibition. Ultimately, the biennial presented the works of the following Yugoslav artists: Bojan Gorenc, Filo Filipović, Anka Burić, Edin Numankadić, Marija Dragojlović, Milija Pavićević, Dušan Otašević, Ilija Šoškić (who, based on archival records, was removed from the biennial due to a conflict with the commissioners), Igor Antić, Mrđan Bajić, Goran Petercol, Ivan

Kožarić, Raša Todosijević, Željko Kipke, Jusuf Hadžifejzović, Marina Abramović, Braco Dimitrijević, Ilija Šoškić, Julije Knifer, Lujo Vodopivec and Miodrag Dado Đurić, as well as three foreign artists – the Finnish artist Marianna Uutinen, and the Turkish-French artists Sarkis and Shamaï Haber.

Because of the problems that befell the preparation of the biennial and the cancellation of many artists from abroad, and in the hope that the situation would stabilise in the future, the organisers called the event an introductory biennial and named the exhibition East/West. The exhibition was opened on 7 June and ran until 30 September 1991.

The organisational concept and structure of this and subsequent biennials were exceedingly interesting, as were the results. In his text about the future of the biennial, Nikola Petrović set out the following ideas with regard to its exhibiting practices:

All art events and exhibitions will revolve around the common 'city-museum' theme. Spaces in the old town, squares and streets, could become natural extensions of exhibition spaces, easily achieved in a city that is largely pedestrian-friendly. The originality of this exhibition lies in the fact that the whole city will turn into a scattered museum of sorts, multiplying itself to become a great experience of informal and friendly encounters.



*Cetinje Biennial Press Release, 1991 Pontus Hultén, Nikola Petrović, Irina Subotić, Jean-Hubert Martin, © Archive of Cetinje Biennials*



Shamaï Haber, *Stone for Peace*, sculpture in public space, Cetinje, 1991, 1st Cetinje Biennial © Archive of Cetinje Biennials

Very quickly the atmosphere surrounding the biennial started influencing life in Cetinje, and the public was largely receptive to the event's presence in the city. Exhibitions popped up in different locations, as well as several exhibition spaces. The format was flexible, and besides visual arts displays there were also theatre productions and experimental Yugoslav music concerts, with some artists creating their installations in public spaces.

Traces of the Cetinje Biennial remained visible in the city for a long time through several permanent works of art, including Sarkis's poetic street names printed on standard blue plates with inscriptions such as "the sun is scorched", "the piano is scorched", and "the alphabet is scorched", which for some became a symbol of the city. Two of Shamaï Haber's cannons and his *Stone for Peace* also remain in Cetinje to this day, albeit without any captions.

The work that is key to understanding the time and context in which the first Cetinje Biennial was held is undoubtedly the performance of the Sarajevo artist Jusuf Hadžifejzović *There is but One Step from Kitsch to Blood*, whose title suggests the darkness that was soon to take over the region.

## The 2nd Cetinje Biennial – Seeing in the Dark

In 1992 the war in Yugoslavia started and the 2nd Cetinje Biennial, planned for the same year, never happened.

The 2nd Cetinje Biennial, titled *Seeing in the Dark*, was held from 19 September to 20 October 1994. The biennial was dedicated to the victims of ethnic cleansing on the territory of the former Yugoslavia.

The international commissioners of the 2nd Cetinje Biennial were Pontus Hultén, Jean-Hubert Martin and Andrei Erofeev. Evgeniya Kikodze was the general commissioner, while the Yugoslav commissioners included Petar Ćuković and Mladen Lompar.

Many of the biennial's artists were from Russia and Georgia, Western Europe and the former Yugoslavia. The biennial was assembled into several exhibitions: In the Rooms at the Government House in Cetinje; *Russian Mission* curated by Andrei Erofeev at the former Russian Legation; *From Tbilisi* curated by Evgeniya Kikodze at Cetinje's Blue Palace; *The West* curated by Jean-Hubert Martin at the former British Embassy; and *Fest Off*, an exhibition of Yugoslav artists curated by Petar Ćuković, Mladen Lompar and Lidija Merenik.

In addition to these exhibitions, many works and artistic interventions were installed in Cetinje's public spaces. The concept and construction of this biennial, like the first one, which was realised on a smaller scale, created a strong connection with the city and its audience, students of art academies and members of the local community, who themselves were often involved in the production of the artworks.



Sarkis, *The Day Was Burned*, intervention in public space, Cetinje, 1991, 1st Cetinje Biennial © Archive of Cetinje Biennials



Milija Pavićević, *Colonade*, installation in public space, Cetinje, 1st Cetinje Biennial, 1991, © Archive of Cetinje Biennials

Two important events marked the 2nd Cetinje Biennial. Firstly, it happened in an atmosphere of isolation and embargo, with the war in Yugoslavia still raging. Moreover, the biennial was at odds with the authorities in Montenegro, and thus completely ignored by most of the state media. At that time Montenegro, as a discarded part of Yugoslavia with its pro-Milošević leadership and involvement in the attack on Dubrovnik, was under international sanctions. Some of the artists who had been invited, such as the IRWIN group, refused to participate in the biennial precisely for these reasons.

Nikola Petrović and the organisational team of the biennial launched an action with the intention of facilitating the arrival of artists in Montenegro and running the overall event. At a roundtable held in March 1994 under the title *Artists Without Borders*, the following questions and topics were raised: What is the use of any form of cultural activity in the midst of the tragedy facing all communities of the former Yugoslavia? How can artists act? Should they? Cultural isolation is a disease of totalitarian regimes, is there a cure for it? Under the conditions of active sanctions, the only form of aid should be 'humanitarian aid', and can a cultural action be seen as humanitarian? What is the fate of culture and information under sanctions? Will we be able to create that cultural space,

independent of all political roles and national interests, without which Europe would not make sense?

Nikola Petrović addressed the United Nations sanctions committee with a request to allow the entrance of artists, curators and journalists to the biennial. After persistent negotiations and support from UNESCO and the Council of Europe, the United Nations sanctions committee issued the first humanitarian exemption for a cultural event, and organised the so-called Plane for Culture flight, which brought to Cetinje artists, curators and journalists who, in turn, brought with them materials to aid their fellow artists in Montenegro.

The 2nd Cetinje Biennial was also crucially marked by Jusuf Hadžifejzović and his execution of the event-performance *Fear of Drinking Water*. Today this is considered one of the most critical performances of this era, as well as a key artwork that testifies to and remains from the Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav wars of the 1990s. The notion behind *Fear of Drinking Water* is built around the artist's meeting with relatives, including his mother and all those he was separated from by nationalism and the war. The Cetinje Biennial and the organisational team, guided by the artist himself, organised the arrival of Hadžifejzović's relatives in Cetinje. The meeting was organised in a public space in front of the French Embassy building in the presence of the biennial's audience. It was the first time the artist met with his family and friends who had escaped from Sarajevo because of the war.



Jusuf Hadžifejzović, *Fear of Drinking Water* (performance scene), performance in public space, Cetinje, 1994 © Archive of Cetinje Biennials

## The 3rd Cetinje Biennial – Roads of Return

The 3rd Cetinje Biennial was held in 1997 and titled *Roads of Return*.

Guide, cover page, 3rd  
Cetinje Biennial, 1997  
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Biennials

# GUIDE

CETINJSKI BIJENALE III



MONTENEGRO, CETINJE

20. SEPTEMBAR - 2. NOVEMBRA 1997

The organisation of the biennial was somewhat different that year. This time Pontus Hultén was the president of the honorary committee, with Jean-Hubert Martin serving as the biennial advisor and Andrei Erofeev as the general commissioner. The 3rd Biennial also introduced the national commissioner category, thus including representatives for the various post-Yugoslav states: Svetlana Racanović and Mladen Lompar. Other commissioners who took part were: Katarina Baikurova (Slovakia), Marilena Bonomo (Italy), Noele di Drago (Switzerland), Sabina Shashi (Austria), Yara Bubnova (Bulgaria), Natalia Goncharova (Russia), Bernard Macade (France), Milena Slavická (Czech Republic), Katarina Koskina (Greece), Fulya Erdemci (Turkey) and Ileana Pintele Teleaga (Romania).

The biennial's exhibitions were: *New Icon* curated by Andrei Erofeev at the Government House; *Movement or Journey of the Artist* at the Blue Palace in Cetinje; *Deprived of Their Homeland* (refugee testimonies), and a photo exhibition curated by Claude Geiss at Biljarda (the former royal residence).

This biennial was memorable for reactions to the *New Icon* exhibition, which caused

protests and attracted criticism from the Serbian Orthodox Church, members of which raided the exhibition and removed the artworks, ultimately resulting in the exhibition's closure and thus censorship.

## **The 4th Cetinje Biennial – Reconstruction**

The 4th Cetinje Biennial was held in 2002, from 22 June to 28 September. The international commissioners were Andrei Erofeev and Yara Bubnova, while Svetlana Racanović was the commissioner for Montenegro, and Katarina Koskina for Greece. The biennial's exhibitions were *Sculptures to Reside in*, *Talking with a Man in the Street*, *The Last Project*, *Reconstruction Metaphor*, and *Works in Progress*.

In terms of production and organisation, this was the most successfully executed of the four biennials, initiated by Nikola Petrović with the idea of creating an international art gathering as a point where East and West meet. Numerous artists from different generations, mostly from Europe, the former Yugoslavia, Russia and several artists from the West, took part. The biennial offered a large number of works and interventions in public spaces, as well as a very active educational programme involving the participation of the biennial's artists themselves.

The UNESCO prize for visual arts was also awarded to the following artists: Vesko Gagović (Montenegro), Athanasia Kyriakos (Greece), Valentin Stefanoff/Nina Kovacheva (Bulgaria), Hüseyin Alptekin (Turkey), Irena Lagator (Montenegro), Stefan Nikolaev (Bulgaria) and Vyacheslav Mizin (Russia). Special awards were given to Alain Bublex, Jean Maneval, IRWIN and Braco Dimitrijević.

Like the previous ones, this biennial was well received internationally, and reported on by many contemporary art magazines and journals. The biennial was also well received in Montenegro, and it might have been the only peace-time biennial that was realised without significant accompanying drama. And, precisely at the point when it seemed that the biennial was stable and continuity had been established, one based on a sustainable production framework, Nikola Petrović was suddenly faced with not being able to receive financial support for the organisation of the 5th Cetinje Biennial. He had made a turn to the concept of ecology, which did not receive any support from the local authorities that were already working on preparing for Montenegro's independence referendum and focusing on culture as a project of empowering national identity and promoting this idea internationally.

In 2003, René Block came to Montenegro, doing research for his exhibition *In the Gorges of the Balkans* (subsequently staged at the Kunsthalle Fridericianum), which presented works by artists from the Balkans. The meetings and talks led to the idea that Block should curate the next Cetinje Biennial. As he was able to provide financing, Nikola Petrović accepted the offer and supported Block's idea to take over the curation of the 5th Cetinje Biennial together with Nataša Ilić (WHW). The event was realised as part of the *In the Gorges of the Balkans project*, and the *Balkan Trilogy*, which was a project of the Kunsthalle Fridericianum. The title of the 5th biennial edition was *Love It or Leave It*, and sections of the programme were realised in Dubrovnik and Tirana in addition to Cetinje.

Today Nikola Petrović, who initiated the Cetinje Biennial, believes that this edition showed some discontinuities with the previous ones, and that its realisation was in conflict with his notion of the meeting of East and West.

It is thus perhaps unsurprising that *Love It or Leave It* was also the last Cetinje Biennial, taking place between 17 July and 19 September 2004.

With Montenegro's independence in 2006 the focus in the field of culture was redirected towards building national identity and national-historical themes. Such a climate was conducive to locally, well-established conservative currents which profited from the myth of Montenegro as a land of painters, a notion originating from the Yugoslav success of artists who came from this part of the world (Lubarda, Milunović, Filipović, etc.). In such a context contemporary art was marginalised, as were contemporary artists. The way that such art was easily defeated and suppressed, even to the point of being forgotten, may have been due to the fact that it is predominantly young women who are successfully engaged in contemporary art.

Braco Dimitrijević, intervention in public space, 4th Cetinje Biennial, 2002 © Archive of Cetinje Biennials



In the years since there has not been a single relevant text published about the biennial, and the collective memory of it has been all but completely wiped out, with even art schools rarely making reference to it.

The Cetinje Biennials were exhibitions with an extremely interesting organisational structure, creating strong links and having an emancipatory effect on the local community. The unfavourable, often radical circumstances in which these exhibitions were framed frequently set up obstacles to the original idea of the biennial, attempts at its realisation to the fullest, and its overall success. However, these exhibitions had a formative effect on several generations of young artists, among whom I count myself. The Archive of the Cetinje Biennials/ACB project was thus initiated by me, Natalija Vujošević, and Irena Lagator Pejović, and is realised as a collaboration between the Institute for Contemporary Art and the Petar Petrović Njegoš Foundation, Montenegro.

To this point we have created exhibitions about the biennials' documentation, and are currently working on making the archive accessible to the public. Also in preparation is a permanent public-space exhibition – *The Cetinje Biennial Archive In Situ* – whose goal is to reconstruct Cetinje's remembrance of these events and to reignite the international artistic exchanges nurtured by the biennial.



Albert Heta, intervention in public space, at the former Serbian embassy (the work was destroyed and removed), 2004, 5th Cetinje Biennial © Archive of Cetinje Biennials

Miha Zadnikar

# What Do We Lose When We Lose Alternative Culture?

Giving a panoramic view of the (conditionally speaking) transition from a very vigorous alternative culture – albeit quite diverse across Yugoslavia, unique in some parts in its ways of finding means of production and financing, while elsewhere rather a copy of various forms of representation, distribution and early identity politics – to the “independent scene” presents a few theoretical difficulties, either related to some specific events of the 1980s or concerning the later radical change of the socio-political system. I will try and stay consistent in assessing the various reasons for this without explicitly trying to determine whether we should talk about continuity or rupture, disintegration. I will, however, outline the specifics in terms of the question posed in the title of this text, of what we lose when we lose alternative culture.

Speaking only of Slovenia, alternative culture is much older than the alternative culture of the 1980s, whose “artistic, theoretical, social and political implications” made it “the largest post-war cultural and social mass movement in Slovenia, producing an impactful cultural and social practice”,<sup>1</sup> as Barbara Borčič wrote a decade ago. One of the undisputable turning points was the notorious students’ meeting convened in the students’ halls of residence in Ljubljana in March 1968, i.e. a few weeks before the dramatic (and thanks to Tito’s address, also cathartic) clash between students and the police in Belgrade. Concerned about the leisure facilities on campus and heavily invested in culture, sport, and technology-related activities, members of the Ljubljana student scene reproached the Yugoslav Student League for being too involved in politics at the expense of culture, the arts and even various experiments. This, in reality highly political decision

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1 Barbara Borčič, “Kjer se srečata umetniška in teoretska praksa. Primerjalni pogled”, see: *Časopis za kritiko znanosti, domišljijo in novo antropologijo*, no. 272 [Zasebni zavod: kultura], Ljubljana 2021, p. 69 in: *Celostna umetnina Laibach. Fragmentarni pogled*. Založba / \*cf., Ljubljana 2013.

of Slovenian students to leave the Yugoslav Student League and create their own organization, paradoxically led to a number of things: a critical press in the *Tribuna* newspaper, critical theory in the *Problemi* journal, the starting of Radio Študent, and access to various means of production and (until then empty) basement spaces on campus. The events around the students' sit-in at the Ljubljana Faculty of Arts in 1971 already clearly indicated the independent direction in which the influential alternative culture in Slovenia was going. As the poet, author, editor, and scholar Iztok Osojnik pointed out in an interview,<sup>2</sup> it was obvious – if one was sensitive enough to the *momentum* of the New Left – that many of the leading figures of or speakers at the protest harboured ambitions to enter the public arena, which would have suited the politicians in power in being an opportune response to the shortcomings of their policies, and far removed from the pretensions for “more rather than less socialism”. Together with like-minded friends, Osojnik thus decided to strike out on his own, following an independent, risk-filled and clearly alternative path outside any existing institution, even outside the existing organizational and logistic scheme, thus paradoxically understanding one of the official goals of socialist self-management: that culture should participate in society with an interest in the basic cell (a commune) and try to involve the workers. The things that strikingly marked the 1970s in Ljubljana were thus the famous *Subrealist Manifesto* [*Podrealistični manifest*], the founding of the Students' Cultural Centre ŠKUC in 1972, a number of literary and music groups, experimental radio and film, the Bežigrad Gallery with its contacts in the world of electronic music, a strong, free and stylistically varied approach in theatre, endeavours to legalize soft drugs, radical events organized in unusual places (Čopova Street, the X-rated Slo-ga Cinema, the National Opera and Ballet House), and the special

2 <https://www.rtv slo.si/1968/iztok-osojnik-zsms-je-bila-avantgarda-partije-studentsko-gibanje-pa-avantgarda-zsms-ja/453565>

“more punk than punk itself” of groups such as the Papa Kinjal Band, Orkestar Titanik, and the peerless Begnograd. In short, the alternative scene here developed in close relation to the student movement, i.e. the students’ autonomous, culturally and politically oriented activities, or as some might say, their well-spent free time. Some elements of the movement can be found – thanks to their numerous associates – in the (contemporary but also earlier) OHO group (many members, working in various fields, and at the intersections between fields); also the small but strong theatre troupes such as Pupilija Ferkeverk, Pekarna and Glej were definitely part of the alternative scene, even though some revisionists now tend to describe them as part of the independent, or in the liberalist jargon of today even *nongovernmental*, culture. A much bigger problem, however, is that the achievements of the students (from 1974 on, under the auspices of the Students’ Conference of the League of Socialist Youth), of ŠKD Forum, ŠKUC and many brave and resourceful individuals have been labelled by generation and relegated to the sphere of *youth culture*, which is a highly detrimental revisionist move, retrospectively placing alternative culture in the sphere of the harmless but – as we can all clearly see today – politically very dangerous centre: the so-called Third Way, which can never be the alternative, but rather its opposite. The final blow was the momentous independent culture of the 1990s, which focused mainly on the visual arts and the related theory, while the rest, the “youth culture”, continued to be based on music and was recognized almost exclusively as subculture, as part of identity politics. A crucial difference should be pointed out here: while alternative culture had included theory that addressed, or was capable of addressing, a wide variety of issues, critically viewing diverse practices (from feminism and the LGBT movement to video and film), what followed was an unbearable sub-specialization in critical reflection. The fact that the 1990s saw more cultural events and public places than ever can only partly explain this puzzle.

Describing the developments in the 1990s as the “second explosion”,<sup>3</sup> Tadej Pogačar was clearly thinking of the 1970s as the first. We are also interested in the broader, historically deeper alternative, as the only way to get to the bottom of the dichotomies, specifics and differences in the discussions of independent culture. Historical irony shows that alternative culture, whatever it was, struck out on its own at a certain point, despite being only possible in that specific socio-political context. The diehard representatives of the political nomenclature, the bureaucrats and the repressive authorities did not understand alternative culture and tried to block it in various ways, but a profound study of the sociological thought of the time can find astonishing parallels to it. Not only the “New Left”, which can be said to have emerged in the “new social movements” of the 1980s, but also the official theory of the League of Communists was often surprisingly close to the ambitions of the alternative scene, although their ambitions in the sphere of culture can be understood as aimed at depoliticizing the sphere: a much broader system of funding than today, exemptions through the Social Bookkeeping Service (SDK), until 1978 a benevolent Act on Associations and Societies, constant correctives and improvements for the benefit of the general population, and last but not least, keeping the class differences in check – even precarious forms of work in culture and the arts entitled people to the same rights, and in terms of taxation treated them equally, as fully employed individuals or those with the status of cultural workers. We should not forget that the “self-managed interest” in the field of culture allowed for alternative forms of work and life. Within a seldom read work, Edvard Kardelj’s *Smeri razvoja političnega sistema socialističnega samoupravljanja* (*The Directions of the Development of the Political System of Socialist Self-Management*), published 45 years ago, we find, in the chapter on pluralism, an appeal to citizens that

3 Cf. Tadej Pogačar (ed.), *Druga eksplozija: 90. leta. Zavod P.A.R.A.S.I.T.E.*, Ljubljana 2016.

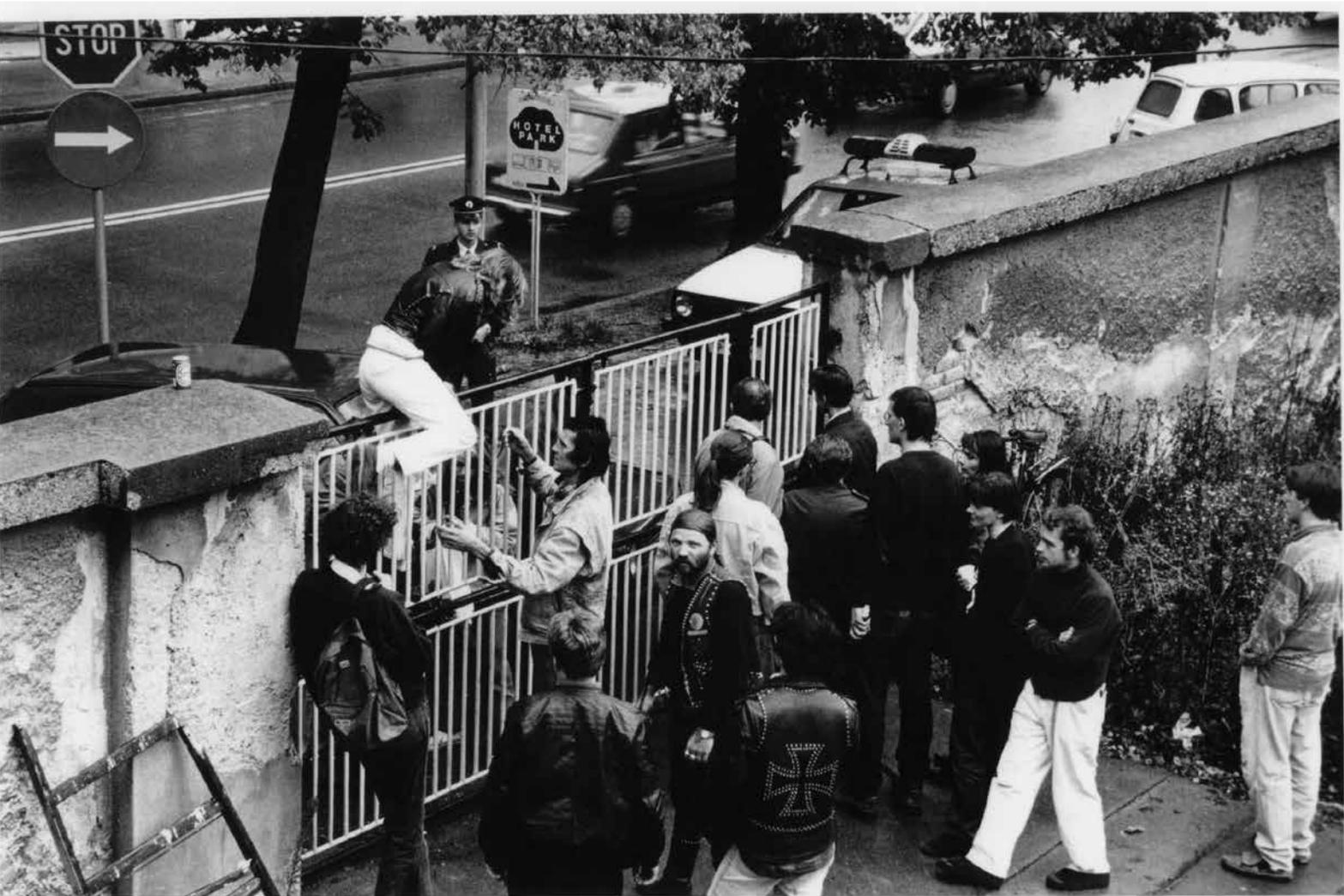
they should go to fewer events and become more active on their own initiative. And more: following the debates about the “withering” of the state, the League of Communists also ceded its place in terms of political activity in the sphere of culture, giving emphasis to the basic, i.e. municipal, unit. And let’s not forget in this context: Yugoslavia never, until its very end, renounced its revolutionary role, which meant that the discussions were held on several levels. In Slovenia, alternative culture found one of its role models in the work of the Liberation Front’s plenary meeting on culture. Perhaps we might even find some connections between, for example, the Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts or the “Ljubljana Printmaking School” and the Partisan guerrilla printmaking and its technically widespread use. And while drawing comparisons with sport is questionable, we can nonetheless say that basketball in Yugoslavia was an example of the alternative, since it proved capable of devising a completely original system of education, conduct, and local organization, as well as giving individuals great personal freedom in terms of position. And so on. Thus, as long as there was a social (and national) revolution in Slovenia, there was also a thriving alternative culture. Unlike the latter, independent activities also occurred in the period of reforms. From the 1990s on, revolutionary tendencies and necessary excess were reserved for individuals and their aesthetic and theoretical contributions.

Several relevant and crucial passages on this can also be found in the writings of Tomaž Mastnak, who was both a prominent representative of the alternative socio-political culture and its great critic. In his famous text “Totalitarizem od spodaj”<sup>4</sup> (Totalitarianism from Below), he stated as early as 1987 that the so eagerly sought-after and anticipated pluralism would lead to and then degenerate “civil society”. Fully aware of how slippery the

4 Tomaž Mastnak, “Totalitarizem od spodaj”, in: *Družboslovne razprave* (Vol. IV, no. 5), Ljubljana 1987.

category of “civil society” is for any serious reflection on society, Mastnak concludes that the state and its apparatus did not put paid to a single venue or activity of alternative culture – that was entirely the doing of the new totalitarianism of the countless tenants’ associations, letters to the editor, informal groups of angry citizens and similar forums, many of which had plenty to say on any subject and were not far removed from the nationalist pre-tensions that tore apart Yugoslavia, or from what can be currently found on social media. But to go a step further: Mastnak is also a

Occupation of Metelkova, 1993.  
Photo: Barbara Čeferin



rare example in terms of self-criticism, i.e. a trait that should be inherent to alternative culture. At the recent celebration marking the 30th anniversary of the Peace Institute, he thus said that at the time of the New Social Movements [Nova družbena gibanja], he and his circle, the protagonists of these very movements, were so naïve and ignorant of the international appetites and geopolitics that in hindsight the whole thing now seems like the Western idea of how a society should live and work after the fall of socialism.

The success of independent culture after the breakup of Yugoslavia was accompanied by the vulgarization of pluralism and by two potential aspects of democracy that are crystal clear today, after the victory of liberalism, and are perhaps even the only aspects of democracy that can exist after revolutionary power is lost. On the one hand, there is a strong *existential democracy*, meaning that the people are “democratically” satisfied with imported American pop culture and its ideas, feeding into the narrative of *democracy as a way of life*. This (type of) democracy has hardly anything to do with politics anymore, occurring when a society is depoliticized to the point that it is satisfied with *identity politics*, and is found precisely in those interest circles that alternative culture despised and fought against. This form of democracy – which, naturally, is no democracy at all – is drowning in liberal jargon that, for instance, suddenly and very tellingly no longer speaks of workshops (since any mention of *work* is inconvenient and unwanted), opting instead for laboratories, incubators and the like.

Since the 1990s, the ways and means of survival of culture and the arts have been a matter of great concern. In that first decade in Slovenia, the Open Society Institute, or the Soros Foundation, gave a lot of support to the ambitions of the alternative scene, although the current view – and not only Mastnak’s – is that alternative culture had more or less disintegrated after 1986. But the

astute running of the Soros Foundation, coupled with an awareness of the moment's fatal global and local developments, at least partly eased the transition to something else, in a way introducing a coexistence of alternative and independent practices, often to the extent that they became mixed up and indistinguishable. A benevolent approach, qualified staff, good committees, trust, uncomplicated application processes and the like created the great illusion of a continuation of a different system, an *alter after party*. To quote Lilijana Stepančić, a one-time Director of the Open Society Institute: "Basically, we don't care what an artist uses a grant for – if it's a car they need at the moment, they should buy a car."

To paraphrase Barbara Borčić in the article mentioned above, we may ask to what extent engagement and reflection are processes that might show a way out of the dilemma and transcend the fact that contemporary art, with all its mechanisms and manifestations, procedures and effects, is a must, while criticism has become its inherent value. At a time of permanent instability and deteriorating conditions of production, can we find an alternative in terms of funding (and demanding the improvement of) production and the conditions needed for work, giving emphasis to work itself; and moreover, is there a place for artistic and theoretical practices that is not explicitly involved in these issues, although they are implicitly involved as part of the constitutive premise? Doesn't the (frequent) shifting of the focus from a work of art to the circumstances of contemporary artistic production suffuse the entire field with the various demands for engagement, activism, and community-related practices?

Today, knowing that there is no "Third Way", or that the Third Way is precisely what we are living and working in today, i.e. (neo)liberalism, we also know that the only possible alternative is the "other way", and not something "third". It is encouraging

that we can reflect (as we are doing at this symposium) on what it can be “other” to, whether it is independent, counter-cultural or alternative. The so-called middle way only leads to fascism. As successors of Yugoslavia, we have suffered a twofold loss: alternative culture has disintegrated, while socialism and potential revolutionary practices have also been suppressed and denigrated as alternatives. The community that for a while intensely lived both the alternative and the social revolution feels this loss especially in the social sphere: the lack of social and political space, the increasingly less accessible means of production, cultural fetishism, the ambivalent attitude to cultural and creative work as labour, the universalist implications of the official view of culture as the only possible view, and the disrupted social (production) relations – all of these hit all the harder the further away a society is removed from being revolutionary. As early as in the 1960s, the artist Tomislav Gotovac noted the significance of the “struggle for new areas of struggle”, stressing both the great potential of alternative culture and its potential shortcomings when it settles for the formal (often imitated) recognition of official artistic practices, and on rare occasions managing to transcend a given field and become transdisciplinary. Is such transdisciplinary ability a political power that could overcome the rigidity of official cultural policies and their imitators (“independent culture”, “the nongovernmental sector”), showing the way to a more general social change? And how can we rely more on the past local and regional achievements when looking for new forms of organization or producing new cultural formations, and how can social theory be brought once again closer to that segment of society that chooses to stay out of the mainstream both in its work and leisure activities? How can such a (segment of) society be ensured the necessary conditions for a decent life, or even just the faith that such a life is possible, with culture and creative work not seen as pure escapism, but as a vital and indispensable part of the broader community, as its counter-economy?



# Biographies

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**Nikola Gelevski**, founder and director of the publishing house Templum since 1989; editor-in-chief of the magazine for art and culture *Margina*, 1994; editor-in-chief of the comics-magazine *Lift*, 1995–2001; founder and editor-in-chief of the online portal *Okno*, 2009.

**Davor Mišković** is a cultural worker from Rijeka. He is the director of the cultural organization Drugo more. Most of his work is related to programing, research, and fundraising in Drugo more. He is also involved in advocacy for the independent cultural scene, and the creation of policy documents and cultural strategies for national and local authorities.

**Ana Panić** is a senior curator and art historian. She has worked as the curator of the visual art collection at the Museum of Yugoslav History in Belgrade since 2005. Her special interests lie in the culture and art of the socialist Yugoslavia, the political practices of (post) Yugoslav art and contemporary art production, the culture of memory and the construction of the collective memory of Yugoslavia, public monuments and their role in the materialization of collective memory, and art as a means for constructing (supra)national identity.

**Vladimir Vidmar** is the curator and artistic director of the Bank of Slovenia's exhibition room Mala galerija. Between 2014 and 2018 he served as the artistic director of the Škuc Gallery in Ljubljana. His curatorial projects include numerous solo exhibitions, among others those of Lala Raščić, Fokus grupa, Mladen Stropnik, Becky Beasley, Nika Špan, Nikita Kadan, Katalin Ladik, Rossella Biscotti, and Kevin van Braak, as well as many international group projects.

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## **The Legacy of Independent Projects in the 1990s**

### **Dediščina neodvisnih projektov v devetdesetih letih**

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