
The Yugoslav Partisan Art: Introductory Note

1 Numerous exhibitions, books and newspaper articles have been dedicated to the 'dark side' of the 'totalitarian regime' and even to the nationalist recounting of the bones from World War II.

2 For a good long-term analysis of the rise of nationalism during the last years of socialist Yugoslavia, see Wachtel. For the rise of (post)fascism in the cultural apparatuses of the new nation-states, especially in Slovenia, see Močnik, *Extravagantia*.

After the break-up of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, the vast majority of commentators, opinion leaders and social scientists of the new nation-states proclaimed a final farewell to everything connected to Yugoslav socialism. As a consequence, even the anti-fascist legacy of the Partisans, which had been inscribed in the official ideology of the former state, received a much more negative connotation.¹ But already in socialist Yugoslavia the revolutionary dimension of the Partisan culture and art was neglected whenever the (local) communist leadership decided to instrumentalise them for celebrations of various anniversaries connected to the People's Liberation Struggle 1941–1945. A rich network of museums, galleries and community centres across Yugoslavia was employed in the exhibition and archiving of the Partisan art. However, this statist glorification of the Partisan past effectively ended long before the break-up: as Lilijana Stepančič notes, the last major exhibition of the Partisan art took place in 1981 (see Stepančič). Thus, the 1980s introduced an increasingly dominant view of the Partisan art as something belonging to a history that had been long gone, an object of ritualistic reproduction by the state, which in turn began to be viewed by many commentators as an authoritarian, even totalitarian system. In the post-Yugoslav climate of 'historical revisionism' (Buden; Močnik, 'Excess') and nationalism,² the Partisan legacy became either a marginal refuge of the old generation, which continued to visit the 'sacred places' of the People's Liberation Struggle, or else an element of the Yugonostalgia of a certain subculture of the urban youth (see Velikonja). No serious political, academic or cultural group would address the history of the Partisan art, now a spectre of the former ruling ideology. By the end of the 1990s, the Partisan art seemed to have been left on the ash heap of history.

However, twenty-three years after the last exhibition and almost fifteen years after the break-up of Yugoslavia an unexpected return to the Partisan art took place. In 2004–2005, the exhibition *Partizanski tisk / The Partisans in Print*, curated by Donovan Pavlinec and held in the International Centre of Graphic Arts (MGLC) in Ljubljana, introduced a selection of Slovenian Partisan graphic art created mostly in the framework of an organised art initiative during the last two years of World War II. The exhibition was supported by an excellent catalogue which consisted of a series of archival artefacts that were put in dialogue with theoretical texts, one of which in particular triggered exceptional theoretical effects. A new edition of this essay as well as a series of responses are published in this volume. The core of the volume consists of the debate between Rastko Močnik, the author of the original essay, and Miklavž Komelj, the author of a subsequent seminal book on the Slovenian Partisan art; other articles either draw on this debate or review and build on other notable contributions to the above-mentioned return to the Partisan art and culture.

THE CONTOURS OF THE MOČNIK–KOMELJ DEBATE

No matter which side one takes in the debate between Močnik and Komelj, one thing is certain: it is to be viewed as belonging to a series of recent processes that have made the Partisan art and culture a valid object of investigation, a recognised subject matter among artists, and even a driving inspiration for a number of cultural and political organisations. In short, due to such events as this debate the Partisan art has become a ‘living archive’³ that can again be reappropriated, revisited and elaborated on. Of course, one cannot attribute this renewed interest in the Partisan art only to such things as the debate

3 The term *archive* is used here in the sense developed by Jacques Derrida. For Derrida, there is no ‘authentic’ beginning of any archive, since any beginning is always already determined by political or scientific authority. Hence, the existence and continuation of the archive is linked to power relations and discursive formations, as implied already by the old-Greek word *arché*. *Arché* as beginning is linked to the specific *space* of the archive as well as to *archonts*, the political body of sovereign leaders. The latter not only guards the space of the archive, but also interprets its meaning. This is why the archive cannot be taken in a historicist and naive terms as a reservoir of objective truth, or the space of ‘authenticity’, but is always already ‘infected’ by political and discursive struggles. (See Derrida.)

4 Journals such as *Arkzin* (Zagreb), *Prelom* (Belgrade) and *Agregat* (Ljubljana) as well as autonomous cultural centres in the region were of vital importance in terms of sustaining an emancipatory space needed for a critical reevaluation of the present to emerge, as they managed to bring together an extremely heterogeneous generation of emerging intellectuals, activists and artists from the various ex-Yugoslav countries.

between Močnik and Komelj; one can, however, point to a series of effects of such events, effects that transcend the local Slovenian scene and ‘infect’ different artistic and theory scenes in the post-Yugoslav space. In retrospect, one can map out a field occupied by individuals and organisations that are starting to engage critically with the topics of historical revisionism, the legacy of recent wars and the transition to capitalism.⁴ And in this respect both the Partisan struggle in general and the Partisan art in particular are becoming privileged points of departure for theoretical, artistic and political critiques of the contemporary ideological conjuncture.

The opening question of Močnik’s original essay itself concerns conditions of possibility of returning to the Partisan art. According to Močnik, with time the Partisan art was able to be viewed beyond the ruling ideology of the former state. However, while it is true that the collapse of the state has finally made the Partisan art intelligible beyond the official ideology, we should also be able to approach this art beyond the opposite ideology, the one of aestheticisation, Močnik argues, and to ascribe to the Partisan art a political dimension that is irreducible to the politics of the former state. One of the most informed attempts to escape this double bind of real-socialist politicisation and post-socialist aestheticisation in relation to the art of Slovenian Partisans is arguably Miklavž Komelj’s 2009 book *Kako misliti partizansko umetnost?* (How to Think the Partisan Art?), a text that is also one of the key theoretical effects of the Močnik–Komelj debate.

If one is to briefly sketch this debate and especially its reflection on the relationship of the People’s Liberation Struggle to art and ideology, one should first note the most vital points of agreement: both for Močnik and Komelj, the People’s Liberation Struggle is a major political and revolutionary rupture with undeniable political and artistic con-

sequences; and they both criticise not only neoliberal capitalism but also real-socialism and the way in which it made socialist art return to anachronistic, pre-Partisan paradigms. As for the main differences between Močnik's position and Komelj's, they mostly concern the questions of the politicisation and aestheticisation of the Partisan art.

DIFFERENTIAE SPECIFICAE OF THE PARTISAN ART

The first difference concerns the question of artistic predecessors and immediate successors of the Partisan art. If both Komelj and Močnik argue that the Partisan art constitutes a striking novelty in relation to the so-called relative autonomy of bourgeois art, they seem to locate this discontinuity differently. For example, Močnik sees the Partisan art's reliance on popular forms as a continuation of the practices of Slovenian pre-war social realism. So, rather than approaching the Partisan art as a complete break with the past, Močnik sees the real achievement of this art in its intensification of certain devices inherited from the immediate past. Komelj, on the other hand, claims that even if the Partisan art appropriated the elements of the past its major artistic and political resources came not from social realism but rather from the experiments of the avant-garde.

This difference between the social realist and the avant-garde influences leads us to the second difference. For Močnik, the rupture that was the Partisan art can be understood only in the context of the People's Liberation Struggle and its project of political transformation: the nature of this art's intensification of the experiments of previous artistic movements cannot be understood without the awareness of its connection to the political project of liberation from fascism. This is why Močnik insists on the relevance of the explicit politics and even

propagandism of this art. At this crucial point, the debate returns to the famous interwar controversy about the ‘Partisan birch-tree’, the propagandistic doctrine according to which even a well drawn birch-tree cannot be a work of art if it is not pierced by a burst shot. Although the doctrine was quickly rejected by Partisan artists and ideologues alike, Močnik does try to be attentive to the potential it bore in terms of emancipatory politicisation of art. Komelj agrees with the negative aspect of Močnik’s claim, namely his critique of the bourgeois relative autonomy of art, but refuses to share his positive alternative, the emancipatory politicisation of art that is supposed to be offered by the Partisan birch-tree doctrine. Instead, Komelj argues that the Partisan art invented a new, post-bourgeois kind of artistic autonomy: only the autonomy from politics can make any politicisation really count, since only politicisation that is not prescribed in advance has the power to actually intervene in a given situation—and the Partisan art is a paradigmatic example of such intervention, according to Komelj.

If both interlocutors seem to agree that the post-war one-party system betrayed the political innovation of the Partisan art, then Močnik seems to partly disregard the heterogeneity of interwar positions that has contributed to this political innovation, while Komelj seems to forget that the Partisan defence of autonomy enabled the subsequent argument about the autonomy of art in socialist Yugoslavia, which after 1953 neatly fit the new self-representation of Yugoslav socialism as a project irreducible to top-down model of the Stalinist state.

This difference can potentially lead to the following pair of mutually exclusive positions: either one defends a strong political interpretation which ‘robs’ art of its plural forms and its own political enunciation, or one embraces the ‘avant-garde’ interpretation of the unique heroism of the Partisan aesthetics. Močnik and Komelj avoid this false

alternative between propagandism and aestheticism by approaching the Partisan struggle as a historic encounter of extraordinary cultural productivity and political experimentation. It is precisely as such an encounter that this struggle seems to invite ever new readings today, be they academic, artistic or political. ♡

References

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