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Yugoslav Border Scenes – Fragments

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This text was archived at the Institute for Contemporary Art in Zagreb collection, as part of the **Research project** conceived in 1997 by a SCCAN – Soros Centers for Contemporary Art Network, funded by the Open Society Foundation, New York.

The purpose of the project was to select, collect and disseminate texts on contemporary art practices in the Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, around Soros Centers for Contemporary Art, written in and about art of the 1990s. The coordination of the project was carried out by Janka Vukmir, SCCA – Zagreb, today the Institute for Contemporary Art, Zagreb.

We did not intervene in any of texts more than just correcting obvious typos and spelling. On the occasion of collecting texts, we were given permission from all authors, to rightfully use them. If anyone now has different instructions, please, contact us at the info@institute.hr.

All of the texts we have collected at the time have been later published on the website of the I_CAN, International Contemporary Art Network, the short-lived successor of the SCCAN.

On the occasion of the exhibition **90s: Scars**, revisiting the art practices and social and political context of the 1990s in the postcommunist countries, the Institute for Contemporary Art is now reoffering a collection of **89 texts and a comprehensive list of then proposed further readings**, on the website of the Institute for Contemporary Art, www.institute.hr.

The exhibition 90s: Scars is curated by Janka Vukmir and organized by the Institute for Contemporary Art and the MMSU – Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Rijeka, on the occasion of the **European Cultural Capital Rijeka 2020**. Originally planned to open May 14, 2020, at the MMSU in Rijeka, due to COVID-19 crisis, is postponed until further notice.

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The conceptual art production of the 1970's, known as **New Art Practice** in the Yugoslav cultural space of the time, had radically broken with traditional institutional mechanisms of art production and presentation. It was F. T. Marinetti who declared that museums were graveyards of rotten corpses, and P. Manzoni expanded this idea with the demand for the demystification of art: The art process should be brought to light, the art itself prevented from becoming a relic in a museum. If artists did not want to comply with the traditional production of art objects, but understood art as the production of thoughts, or significations, they had to conceive a new vision of artistic activity and assume their own position defined also by social engagement. Since they saw their role in a wider social context, they often formed groups which did not have a common programme, but were combined on the basis of similar viewpoints on art and life. Their projects actually existed on the borderline between art and life and, in their impalpability, also on the borderline between different fields of art.

New Art Practice developed most strongly in two major art centres, Zagreb and Belgrade. The Student Cultural Centres were founded in both cities around the time of the student revolts, and they included art galleries that developed mutual co-operation and exchange of projects and exhibitions. This history could be seen at the **New Art Practice: 1966-1978** exhibition in the Modern Art Museum in Zagreb in 1978.

It was characteristic of the Zagreb scene that artists stepped out from the "safe haven of their studios" into the streets and squares, where they

ventured to face a wider audience with their "live actions". These actions and provocations shocked passers-by and met with a great deal of aggression. To support one another, some of these artists (M. Stilinović, B. Demur, Ž. Jerman, V. Martek, S. Stilinović and F. Vučemilović) organised an informal group, **The Group of Six Artists**, in 1975. Their direct and explicit artistic statements and actions radicalised artists' behaviour as a form of artistic expression, but inevitably remained on the social and artistic fringe. They sought alternative, non-institutional spaces for their actions, and in 1978 they founded, along with other Zagreb protagonists, The Labour Union of Artists; in their premises on Mesnička Street, called Podrum (the Cellar), they organised exhibitions, actions and performances. They developed a harshly critical attitude towards the art system, oriented towards the democratisation of art and the materialistic analysis of an artwork, its structure, language, syntax, and semiology, and they radicalised the relationship between art and life, and took it as a grave and fateful issue. The activity of the Labour Union of Artists and one part of its membership (D. Čada, Ž. Kipke, V. Martek, R. Radovanović, M. Stilinović, S. Stilinović, B. Ivandić, M. Molnar, G. Petercol, D. Rakoci, D. Simičić, F. Vučemilović, V. Delimar, Ž. Jerman, V. Dodig-Trokut, T. Gotovac, Ž. Kutnjak, and A. Maračić) was only presented in Ljubljana in **ŠKUC Gallery** in 1981. It was around this time that these artists acquired the space of Extended Media on Starčevićev Trg in Zagreb, where they presented Yugoslav and foreign artists. During the recent events connected with the war in Croatia, the entire building containing the head office of the Croatian Union of Fine Artists, the Karas Gallery, the Artists' Club and the Extended Media Gallery was occupied by followers of Paraga's Croatian Party of Rights and their soldiers of the Croatian Armed Forces; they destroyed the archive, and "there is nothing left of the above mentioned activities in this building", as our Zagreb collaborator Leonida Kovac wrote.

In the 1970's, Belgrade had been an important international arena of film (Fest) and theatre (Bitef) festivals, while the Student Centre Gallery held April Meetings every spring with the participation of important international artists, including Joseph Beuys for example. And **the April Meetings** were also the framework for performances by domestic and foreign artists. Without doubt two of the most radical performers in our surroundings were Marina Abramović and Raša Todosijević, active in the Generation '71 group together with S. Milivojević-Era, N. Paripović, Z. Popović, and G. Urkum. If conceptual art was strictly analytical in essence, the performances were expressive and suggestive because of the physical

presence of the artists, their actions taking place "live" in front of the audience. The viewers were deprived of their safe position as indifferent onlookers, and repositioned from the neutral space into the space of "manipulation and provocation". They witnessed a (self-) destructive act, in which the artist became both the subject and the object of the action, while the ongoing venture was able to provoke a feeling of anxiety in the viewers. Performances by **M. Abramović** and **R. Todosijević** were characterised by two basic determinants: their full engagement as artists, brought to the utmost limits of their physical and mental capacities, and the standpoint that the profession of an artist should be taken strictly solemnly and in full scope. Jaša Denegri stated that art became a means of social and psychological criticism, an expression of the uncontrolled process of life and death, while Raša Todosijević wrote: "Catharsis, violence, profound psychological and emotional exploration, intensification of sexuality in all its forms are the specific language, the body language, with which the Ego expresses itself and its relationship with the existing morality and cultural-social patterns surrounding the artist as an individual."

The Student Cultural and Arts Centre (ŠKUC) in Ljubljana lagged behind the respective centres in Zagreb and Belgrade for several years, and it acquired its permanent premises at Stari Trg 21 only in 1978. Since then ŠKUC has been working continuously in several programme sections with their own activities. The opening event itself represented a turning point, as the exhibition of the documentation on OHO, the only Slovene conceptual art group, was accompanied by a concert by Pankrti, the first Slovene punk group. Around that time the Predrazpadom theatre group staged "The Death of Death", a ritual street performance in the old part of Ljubljana, without acquiring the necessary permission from the authorities. In 1979, on the occasion of the opening of the exhibition of his works and works by Vele Tasovski in ŠKUC Gallery, the painter Jože Slak (with the participation of M. Breclj, I. Volarič-Feo, B. Ogorevc, M. Jesih, and Miss L.) staged an event, a ritual body-painting action, related in its expressiveness to numerous actions of the Vienna Actionists. While he was studying at the Academy of Fine Arts in Ljubljana in the early 70's, the artist had already begun using his own blood to paint. At that time, the process of painting was inaccessible to the public, it could only be seen in the paintings, which included razor blades, blood-stained cotton wadding, and so forth. The artist said that he tried to paint with different life juices (plant juices, sperm, blood), invisible paints not defined merely by their colour value, but primarily by the psychological character of the substance

used. This action was entitled *You Shed My Heart's Blood*, after a poem by the Slovene poet Simon Gregorčič; the artist endeavoured to treat the poem as accurately as possible, and transferred it from the realm of symbolism into a concrete action. The gallery was completely packed. At the beginning of the action, Joze Slak stepped in front of a rusty medical trolley, covered with white cloth, and rhetorically read his statement. Next he lifted the cloth, revealed a large piece of meat underneath, and laid it on the floor. He cut his wrist on the inner side with a razor blade, and pressed the wound so hard with his other hand that blood came pouring out of it. The blood started to drip onto the cloth - Later he dropped black soil onto the cloth, and lifted it up in front of the viewers to the sounds of something resembling a hymn. The action - alluding, among others things, to official openings of monuments - was thus brought to its conclusion. The described action of painting as a specific approach to the "creation of a painting" transferred the significance from the final product-painting to the very process of creation. This process was both real and allegorical. The artist's body as an expressive element was placed within the framework of a self-destructive act, which took on the form of pure shock, but at the same time provoked associations with ritual initiations, sacrifices, inseminations, and incarnations. The artist forged the canvas-blood-soil-painting chain with his own physical presence, and with an action that, however, could also be understood as a desire for experimentation, painting with different materials, and so on. In an interview by Tadej Pogačar, published in the first issue of *M'ARS* magazine, Jože Slak said of his occasional actions: "When I was a kid, and also later, the ritual of exhibition openings seemed very funny to me - I simply made this ritual in my own way, I ridiculed it. And it seemed fun to do things that are considered to be a disgrace - a disgrace for the viewer and for the artist. An awkward feeling."

In his introduction to the discussion on *Art in the Seventies*, held in Equrna Gallery in 1990, Tomaž Brejc, professor at the Ljubljana academy of fine art, questioned how it was possible to create even a single painting after the OHO group experience. Perhaps the action by painter Jože Slak is one of the possible answers. Certainly, the above question stands primarily for the generation of artists who left ŠKUC after 1980, and organised themselves around Equrna Gallery. ŠKUC Gallery underwent a short period of "emptiness", but soon a new generation turned up, which was well aware of its own social position. It endeavoured, through its artistic activity, to pervert the traditional system of the reading/viewing of artworks, and to surpass - by means of multi-media creations - the division between

activities suitable for galleries and museums, and those belonging to the streets, or to the clubs - This generation was not so strongly influenced by the OHO group, but rather by the protagonists of media (rock) culture, and also by conceptualist artists from other spaces, whom ŠKUC Gallery started to present systematically after 1980. Examples of these include the exhibition and discussion by the members of the Labour Union of Artists from Zagreb; the exhibition by M. Stilinović and T. Gotovac; the Heralds of Apocalypse exhibition by G. Djordjević, which highlighted the death of the original and the establishment of copying procedures; and the exhibition accompanied by a lecture of Belgrade performer Raša Todosijević. Dušan Mandić, one of the then art directors of SKUC Gallery (together with B. Borčić and M. Gržinić), wrote that this action had a double meaning in the current Slovene cultural situation: the presentation of the artist's work, which transcends the borders of traditionally-conceived art, enables us to keep a distance from Slovene art production, and also triggers the question about the closed nature of this cultural milieu, which only today, after many years of activity, introduces a fine art practice (the artist also exhibited a retrospective documentation of his performances) not present in our space. - Let us only remember the artist's expression "Was ist Kunst?", which has decisively influenced reflections on art, especially those of the IRWIN group, and his (self-) destructive performances with their influences on the origins of performance in our space.

This same generation, which we referred to as the generation of the eighties, and which constituted itself as the Ljubljana subcultural, or alternative scene, faced the fateful themes of death, violence, and representation. In the first issue of ŠKUC-Forum's Viks journal, entitled Violence and Representation, this kind of violence was defined as violence carried out against the forms of subcultural life, and as the violence, on the other hand, introduced by the subcultural production itself in the form of symbolism.

On the one hand, it was a purely personal, existential experience of death, violence, suicide, repression and (self-) destruction, strongly evident in the Galerija ŠKUC Izdaja, No. 9 publication by D. M. and B. Razkolnikof, and in the solo exhibition of paintings by Dusan Mandić (interventions on postcards from the time of his military service in one of the largest Yugoslav barracks in Niš, Serbia), accompanied by a slide screening. Two slides - one of a soldier and another of a red cross, projected one beside the other - show very directly how immediate confrontation with violence, surveillance and repression affects the artist prevented from working, from painting. He wrote: "What emanates from this

letter/package, from the look through the mail into seeing, is like a speech from the grave, something similar to mass media (I made six of those crosses), something that degrades one step lower than the "painting", only to be, to exist; otherwise it is nothing " The desire to paint, and a simultaneous awareness of total social control, total powerlessness, in which one finds a hole that extricates the surplus value in the form of the cross, the ceaselessly repeating cross ". The artist's interventions on postcards showing the specific iconography of a "beautiful, idyllic world", revealed the fallacy of imposed images, and their transformation into the world of violence. The intervention on a postcard of the Čelekula (Skull-Tower) near Niš with hundreds of skulls built into it, was published in the above-mentioned publication together with the following poem by B. Razkolnikov, printed over it:

19/09/82

Some Sunday I will be at home alone. The wounds from fire are becoming deeper and deeper, they turn into scars, and they heal. When the pain in my head is too strong, I start on myself. It helps for a moment. For a moment. And this is also a pleasure. ALSO a pleasure. I will cut and pierce my veins, let's say that I will open them, and the blood will slowly pour into warm water. Water.

In 1983, on the other hand, the then members of the R IRWIN S group enacted their first graffiti project on the walls of the FV Disco in Youth Center Zgornja Šiška, Ljubljana. It was entitled Slaughter and Torture in the Primorska and Štajerska Regions of Slovenia, and depicted violence. On that occasion they wrote, among other things: "This action has the effect of a provocative act which prompts consumers to destroy the exhibited materials by writing and ripping - a consequence of their practice of expressing themselves in such and similar places. The viewers are forced to equate form and content. The events from our recent history with their potent horror and unpleasant emotions also bear within them an enchanting aesthetic radiation, which influences the atmosphere and the dance ritual itself. Throughout history, some form of ritual accompanied killings, tortures, and sacrifices. Dancing to rock music, and the way of life in rock clubs, are closely connected to the notion of ritual. The confrontation with the painting-viewer-space-music actions becomes a decisive potential that activates the consumers. An artwork becomes an activity, it becomes a visible moment of the mode of living."

The FV Disco was led by the FV 112/15 group. In their works they staged violence related to the state rituals of power, to sexuality; later they continued this activity as the Borghesia group. Modern technology and

mass media procedures, and their mutual relations, created in Borghesia's multi-media projects an effect of spectacle, which has loosened all the borders between different art spheres.

Marko Kovačič introduced performance into our space and is the only artist who still develops it. Marko Kovačič enacted numerous projects marked by their multi-media character, and revealing his awareness of sculpture, film, theatre, and music. One would factually have difficulties in distinguishing in his work between different artistic procedures, materials, languages, and media. They are all closely intertwined, and thus they seize the viewer in a strictly organised dramatisation of viewing the narrative.

He also includes mechanisms of modern technology and mass media in his performances, but actually all the attention is redirected towards himself as the enactor of the events. His physical presence places a vulnerable, erotic body in front of the viewers, which draws them into its own rhythm. Self-destructive acts, (self-) annihilation of the image, its transformations and transmutations do not represent salvation for the viewer. The performance has become risky, and a part of this risk must be assumed by the viewer.