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Art "For" and "Against".
Activist Art in Yugoslavia of the
Eighties - Democratic and
Totalitarian Options

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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.

Berislav Valušek

Art "For" and "Against". Activist Art in Yugoslavia of the Eighties - Democratic and Totalitarian Options

This essay is based on art material of the Exhibition under the title "Art FOR and AGAINST, Art - Politics - Ideology". The Exhibition took place in Banja Luka (Bosnia and Herzegovina), from November 1989 to January 1990. I had been preparing the Exhibition for almost a year. During that period, I visited studios of all the artists that took part in the Exhibition (50 of them), and I visited a lot of other artists all over the former Yugoslavia. Already at that time, at the beginning of the year 1989, it was obvious that "something was going on". Nobody supposed that that "something" would be so bloody and humiliating. It was also clear who, in former Yugoslavia, has chosen a totalitarian option and who has chosen a democratic one (whatever it meant). The art of that period was a battlefield of the options we live today. Considering the time-distance, sign and significances are even easier to be understood today.

To see more clearly what is happening nowadays, we need a short introduction. In former Yugoslavia the beginning of the eighties confirmed postmodernism in the art. At the same time, it was the period of democratization of the political and public life. The control of the Communist Party and government became less rigorous. The reasons for that change were Tito's death on one side, and changed circumstances in the world, on the other.

The process in former Yugoslavia coincided with the same process in the world (Gorbachev and "glasnost", the fall of Berlin wall, etc.). The

economic, social and political crisis of the eighties caused a new stratification of political interests. The outcome was that national option became stronger than before.

The Serb president Milošević began this process in 1987. Kosovo crisis was a good alibi for limiting the independence of the autonomous provinces Kosovo and Vojvodina and changing the political management in Montenegro (Crna Gora). The national and nationalistic program that Milošević used was realised by the most important scientific institution in Serbia: The Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts. This program aroused reactions in all the other Yugoslav republics. Economical, political and social problems that have been waiting for years to be resolved, and the dangerous question of national rights, helped Milošević to push Yugoslavia into a deep crisis. This process was irreversible.

The first free elections in Slovenia and Croatia were organized in 1990. Unable to beat the opponents and control them by political means, Serbia began the war in Slovenia in June 1991, using the Yugoslav Army as the instrument to accomplish its goals. This war ended in seven days. In August the same year, Serbia began the war in Croatia, and in February next year the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

While writing the text for the catalogue for the Banja Luka exhibition, I tried to give the precise meaning of the term ACTIVIST ART. This is the engaged art where engagement happens inside the problem of the work of art itself (disregarding motivation which can, more or less clearly point out social, political, ideological or other contents). This direction in art puts a question mark upon society, system or government. It provokes and denies, it is subversive and dangerous, it presents demystification and negation. Such kind of art creates its own new reality, its own language, negating the reasons that are beyond. Adorno says: "There is no socially truthful art if it is not truthful itself."

There is another kind of art which is hard to recognize from the activist art - POLITICALLY TENDENTIOUS ART, through which society gravitates towards accomplishing collective aims inside the domination of a simple idea. This is the direction in art where engagement means domination of society as an accomplished object or closed, perfect system. Glorification of reality is present, or, in better case, reality is declaratively illustrated. Art is turned into propaganda, advertisement, and, as the outcome, in the opposition and negation of itself non-art.

Ideology and Politics

The exhibition "Surrealism and social art 1929-1950" (Museum of Modern Art, Belgrade) and Exhibition "Activist Art in Yugoslavia 1919-1969" (Slovenj Gradec, 1969), represent the history of Activist art in former Yugoslavia. In the turbulent fifties the art gained its autonomy (EXAT 51 group, exhibitions at Riječki salon etc.). The sixties brought universal humanitarian engagement of a broad spectrum with, at first sight the disengaged GORGONA group. The seventies were sceptic about the media and wanted answers about the role and function of art in the society.

What about the eighties? Eighty years after the appearance of "The First Futurist Manifesto" (1909) do "the elements of poetry ... courage, spirit and revolt" still count? Is there anybody who wants to "free Italy from numerous museums in which we cross the land like graveyards"? Is it "a must for art to resign from the past", is "a racing car" (still) "more beautiful than Nike from Samos"? In other words, does still exist, or is some new big idea born which could wake up the artists' creative potential and concentrate their energy to reach their goal?

Almost certainly, the answer to these questions is no.

At the beginning of the eighties the art of that period was retrograde. It represented a need for highly aesthetic emotionality, the art that shut its eyes to reality that became more and more painful, the art like ideological *fata morgana* and a means of manipulation. Today we must admit that to resign from the ideas of the historical avant-garde means pluralism and that progressivism is the road that never really existed. We are about to admit that we went the wrong direction and are ready to go back. Agitation propaganda immanent to opposition changed to an integrational one which aimed at social stability, created coexistence of different ideological, political and artistic models and systems.

What can, in the period when all the great ideas are dead, creative, critical - activist art do? Where are the possibilities of art engagement? Here is one of possible answers. It can use the very methods, language and media that are ideological and political means of the system this art opposes to (at least in appearance if not by quality and quantity of communication). Exactly like LAIBACH (rock-group from Slovenia) says in 1983: "Every art is subjected to political manipulation (indirectly - consciousness; directly) except the one that uses the very language of manipulation itself." Similarly Hans Haacke creates his economic-political messages in the form of

advertisements in luxurious magazines; Beuys had a bureau called "Organization for direct democracy by peoples' voting"; Jenny Holzer uses in her works fluorescent ribbons for advertising, and quite a lot of artists use video as a means of expression. The question is what is of communication the range of these means of expression. Minor, almost of no importance. Photography (newspaper), TV and film, transmitters that also use art language are today's strongest visual mediators that are completely ideologized, entirely (and all over the world) controlled by the establishment. On the other side, there are pictures and statues who the public of which is limited by the number of people visiting museums and galleries. (Has it ever happened that soldiers have occupied a museum or gallery instead of a TV station?)

Art, like culture, uses only its own language, even when it puts on a political outfit. In the situation when culture is repressed, answers by using the institutional language of culture, art uses an autonomous language. The problem is that art fighting against the ruling ideology uses the space of the ideology; it finds the reason in opposing the ideology and therefore is inevitably defined by the ideology. The system permits a certain amount of provocation and gets legitimacy out of it. "Freedom of creativity" is just a small bordered field surrounded with a bigger field called establishment - power - ideology - politics.

As a system of ideas which reflects the reality, ideology is out of categories "truth" and "false"; it is entitled to represent "absolute truth". Ideology is realized through institutions and especially is interested in the influence on politics and art. It plays with signs (without contents) made into symbols. In that way society is structured as a system of signs; having, for example, a car doesn't mean to satisfy the need, but to satisfy an artificially created need. That is why today design, as one kind of art, is completely (indirectly but completely) in service of the ruling ideology. In what way then can art avoid the ever-present terrorism of ideology. Before we try to answer this question, let us see the way engaged art (activist art) developed in Yugoslavia in the eighties.

Models

I wanted to find answers to the questions: Which is the methodological means of realization of art engagement? Who are the authors engaged in the first described manner, and who are those whose engagement can be described as the second one? Wishing to make this distinction, I

recognized five basic models of politicizing and political ideologization of art.

The first model is based on the relatively naive playing with signs and symbols which are used as the material for new artistic or simply decorative art constructions. That is the model in which self-censorship is ever present, but it is the first step towards asking (unpleasant) questions.

The second model is the ironization of symbols. It separates them from the general context of usual appearances, redesigning and fitting them into new systems which give new meanings. As in most cases the point is in the signs and symbols of socialist revolutions. This model can already be recognized as the potential danger for the practice which confirms them.

The third model is moralizing. It tries to point out the wrong places of political practice or such practice itself is condemned. In these cases, the unconcealed conflict between the artist and art already begins as the autonomous units on one side, and the social reality as closed in itself and defined totality, on the other side.

This three-part grading can be understood as one totality which has an essential characteristic to inquire about social circumstances or to define the artist as an independent thinking subject and art as intellectual practice. None of these models gives 'answers, they only put questions casting doubt on existing social values.

The fourth model of politicizing - ideologization of art offers answers. It is non-artistic; one's own (artistic) definition by a political or ideological structure is accepted without any reserves (directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously). In Yugoslavia of the eighties there are two directions: the first one is already the completely weak and anachronic direction of glorification and further mythologization of the revolution and revolutionary premises of society, while the other direction relies on national programs which coincide with the politics of carrying out these programs.

And, finally, the fifth model, that can never be found in its own form, but always entangled in previously analyzed models. It is the model in which the wholesome, global world situation (which means even those local situations) is resolved by Thanatos - death - by the way of art. At the end of the eighties and the beginning of the nineties we witnessed the fact that the main theme of many exhibitions in the world was death (The New Museum

of Contemporary Art, "Interrupted life", New York, for instance): Namely, death in its metaphorical, artistic way seems to be the only means to get away from the everpresent and overwhelming terrorism of ideology. The history of modern art and historical avant-garde groups considered utopia as the ideal shelter from ideology. The rigid present tense in that "no place" changed and became an optimistic vision of the future. Today there is no more a "great idea" or a utopistic project for the future, and activist art has, in one part, turned to the opposite direction: dystopia or negative utopia. While utopia incorporates hope, dystopia means fear for the destiny of humankind and incorporates doubt. But where is doubt, there is hope, so the contradiction of the world is resolved by one final decision - death.

Let us see which models of politicizing - ideologization of art have been used in particular parts of former Yugoslavia in the eighties.

First three models, which are subversive by definition, can be found all over former Yugoslavia. The fifth model which points out death as the resolution, is connected to urban surroundings with a strong artistic tradition such as Ljubljana (Slovenia), Zagreb (Croatia), Belgrade, Novi Sad (Serbia).

The first type of the fourth model, non-artistic glorification of the system, can be detected all over the former Yugoslavia. But the second one, that is the direction with a national program, was present only in Slovenia, Serbia and Macedonia. In Slovenia there is the art group IRWIN from Ljubljana which, in a non-typical manner uses Slovenian national symbols and myths, but the artists used them to denounce the reality itself. Group IRWIN, part of a larger art movement called "Neue Slowenische Kunst" (NSK) used the language of totalitarian systems (especially German Nazism) very intelligently, to point out the totalitarian nature of the society and system.

In Macedonia the national thematic was scarce but present. The most rigid national and nationalistic program in art was present only in Serbia. What was the way it has been realized and how could it be recognized? What was its principle of action? It used the same means and ways as it had done always in the past.

If society is a national category, and culture is national and international, it is enough just to agree with a one-dimensional definition of culture and apply such definition to art. Instead of destroying the myths (demystification as condition for desideologization), in Serbia began the process of renovating old national myths and fabricating new ones. The

most exposed and used was the myth about Kosovo, a memento of the Serbian defeat in the battle against the Turks on the field named Kosovo in 1389. After that lost battle, Serbia was under Turkish government for the next 500 years. The myth about Kosovo incorporates the idea of the permanent loser's pattern in Serbian history, which is to be changed, and the idea about a strong and big Serbia to avoid new defeats. Using this myth during two Balkan and two World Wars, Serbia has become ten times bigger than it was before the First Balkan War.

To satisfy the need of daily politics, the Kosovo-myth was modernized with the story about big Albanian threat (the Albanians being today 90% of the Kosovo population). A great part of the Serbian art production of the eighties leaned on its own national background. Collectivity became stronger than individuality, one idea became stronger than all the others, a very well-known pattern was born in history: one nation (state), one leader, one idea (party). So, the ideologization that was expressed by the way of myths became complete. Such kind of art is politically tendentious, instrumentalized, engaged in a banal and vulgar way, it is regressive. Its ideological position coincides in all details with political theory and practice - that is with the ruling ideology of the moment.

Instead of a critical distance from the society, this kind of art incorporates a sort of fighting dictated from the outside. Doing that, it loses freedom and becomes its own negation - false art or non-art.

Last but not least, I have to say that in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina I did not find a simple example of politically tendentious art with a national prefix in 1989. This is, maybe, why war is still going on in these republics of former Yugoslavia.