

Bojana Pejić

Postcommunism and the
Rewriting of (Art) History)?

[Written at the occasion of the exhibition Aspects and Positions, held in
1999 and 2000 in Vienna, Budapest, Barcelona, and Southampton.]

[7.155 words]

Serbia



EUROPSKA PRIJESTOLNICA
KULTURE



Republic
of Croatia
Ministry
of Culture
Republika
Hrvatska
Ministarstvo
kulture



REPUBLIKA HRVATSKA
Ministarstvo
turizma



Institute for
Contemporary
Art Zagreb

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.

Bojana Pejić

Socialist Modernism and the Aftermath

„Art which did not upset, nor ask enigmatic and "unpleasant" questions, suited [our] politicized and to a great extent vain society of the 50's. Oriented toward the laws of form and the pictorial problems of painting, [Socialist] Aestheticism was "modern" enough to pacify our complex of being "open towards the world", traditional enough - as a reformulated, intimate aesthetics from the 30's - to satisfy the new bourgeois taste which emerged from social conformity, and inert enough to satisfy the myth of a happy and unified community. It had everything that was needed in order to melt into a politically projected image of society." Lazar Trifunović, 1983¹

Communist Modernism?

Today, with the Age of Lenin (and Tito) in ruins, and with Communism in East Europe is almost dead, almost buried, one may ask a bold and non-academic question: did the Commies really have a Modernism? And if so, was this Modernism effected by Paris, or by the avant-garde "experiment," as formulated in Moscow and Leningrad, during the earliest decades of our century? Was "our" post-war Modernism in any way influenced by the American experience of the 50's? In other words, which modernist tradition do we have in mind when we talk about the Modernism formed over last fifty years in the "Other Europe"? Can abstract art of the 50's be considered a "universal language" or in Germany, a *Weltsprache* (world language) to be retroactively reduced to a nationally rooted abstraction? Is such a nationally defined Modernism (citing Icelandic, Portuguese or Swiss Modernism, for example) really so different from, say, the Polish, Lithuanian or Serbian Modernist ventures? How then would we name a Modernism produced within (and sometimes even against) the given ideological scenery, which was so thoroughly different in each Socialist country? Can one use today

¹ Lazar Trifunović, *Enformel u Beogradu [Informel in Belgrade]*, ex.cat., Belgrade: Umetnički paviljon Cvijeta Zuzorić, 1982, 11

the term "Communist Modernism", a phrase considered, some time ago, a *contradictio in adjecto*? Or is it better to say Socialist Modernism? And finally, discussing post-1945 art in an Eastern European context, are we also to examine the politics of "non-political art,"² since High Modernism was, at least in SFRJ and Serbia, accepted as an official art ideology, and that precisely during the coolest years of the Cold War when, in 1961, Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRJ) embraced the Nonalignment International Policy? Bearing in mind that the Nonaligned movement included a large number of poor, post-colonial countries - reminding us that, in this part of the world, our Socialist art was shown, and our weapons sold (and from where we regularly received bananas) - one comment could be considered very interesting here: In 1963, when a (figurative) painter timidly asked an apparatchik working on commission, for International Relations in Belgrade, why figurative painting was never sent abroad, he was answered that, "such paintings could only go to the underdeveloped countries".³

The story of Socialist Modernism in Serbia becomes somehow complicated at the start, because the acceptance of abstract art here was followed by the argument voiced so many times in Serbian (art) history. Regardless of all the historical, cultural and ideological differences, there was one basic fact which Serbian art shared (and still does) with most of the European countries situated on the continent's geographical margins. Since the Age of Enlightenment, that is, since the beginning of the Age of "Europeanization", and the conception of Academicism in Serbia, our (art) intelligentsia has been busy defining itself by way of separating the "local," "authentic" and Christian-Orthodox norms, "our" norms, from "universal", "cosmopolitan", "European" (read as Catholic) and "imported" cultural values. In 1963, just a few months after Josip Broz Tito's speech against abstract art, Danilo Pejović, a Croatian philosopher (soon to become editor-in-chief of the Praxis journal) reiterated something which had haunted, as it were, Serbian art (as well as art in Croatia, Montenegro, Slovenia, etc.) for centuries: "We should bear in mind that we have submitted to influences which come from the West, but also to those which originate in the East: Socialist Realism, for instance, was not born in Central Bosnia but was

² See for example: Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art. Abstract Expressionism, Freedom and the Cold War*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1983; P. Wood, F. Francina, J. Harris and C. Harrison, *Modernism in Dispute. Art since the Forties*, New Haven&London: Yale University Press in association with The Open University, 1993; Piotr Piotrowski, *Znaczenia modernizmu [Meanings of Modernism. Towards a History of Polish Art Since 1945]*, Poznan: Dom wydawniczy Rebis, 1999.

³ Quoted after 16. Predrag J. Marković, *Beograd izmedju istoka i zapada 1948-1965 [Belgrade Between the East and the West 1948-1965]*, Belgrade: NIU Službeni list, 1996, 428.

implemented from abroad, and the same goes for abstract painting."⁴ He contended the key aspect - also the eternal trauma - of our geo-cultural "being", namely the issue of influences, the problem of catching-up, and the desperate quest for an "original" cultural identity, for artistic uniqueness, and a local authenticity. The history of Serbian 20th century art - produced before, during and after Communism - is a narrative about a composite and dialogical identity which has always had to negotiate between the inside (the essentially conservative milieu of the Balkans) and the outside (impulses it needs to take from outside).

NO to Realism, YES to Humanism

The quest for a modernistically shaped and/or "autonomous art" could originate from SFRJ's ideologically framed landscape only after 1948, when the break between Yugoslav CP and the Soviet Union (conflict with the Cominform) was finalized. Officially, the lifespan of Serbian "heroic" Realism was short. It lasted only five years (1945 to 1950) and produced a couple good paintings.⁵ These years witnessed the (re)birth of many theoreticians of Socialist Realism, but of relatively few practitioners. Unofficially, "our" realism lasted much longer, as the demarcation line between the "real" Socialist Realism and persistent Academic Realism, and "modern traditionalism," was hardly ever clearly drawn. However, in public life, in Serbia and SFRJ, it continued to live on in our social/socialist rituals, like the May Day Parade (always including a display of the army's military "readiness"), in Tito's Birthday, celebrated annually, under the name of Day of the Youth, and in the "spontaneous" receptions organized after Tito's travels, etc. Socialist-realist or rather totalitarian patterns like these survived even after Tito's death in 1980, and lasted until the end of the 80's. By the end of the de-Stalinization in Serbia, the old quarrel, Realism vs. Modernism, engaged two literary journals, *Delo* and *Savremenik* from Belgrade. This began in 1955, the same year the journals were founded, and lasted until the end of the decade.⁶ The realists, most of them writers gathered around *Savremenik* (The Contemporary), were either Socialist-Realist Separatists or Academic-Realist Fundamentalists. Accused by the modernist contingent of being "conservatists", "Zhdanovists", "pro-Stalinists" and "dogmatists", they tried holding the old concept of *ideiinost* (ideological orientation) in literature and art. The realists had had a rather

⁴ Danilo Pejović, "Kultura i birokratija" [Culture and Bureaucracy], *Gledišta*, Vol. VII, No.1963, 46.

⁵ cf. *Socijalistički realizam u Srbiji 1945-1950* [Socialist Realism in Serbia], ex. cat., Belgrade: Umetnički Paviljon Cvijeta Zuzorić, 1989.

⁶ On the *Delo-Savremenik* polemics see Dušan Bošković, *Stanovišta u sporu* [Standpoints in Conflict], Belgrade, 1981.

convincing argument, as they claimed that figurative art could best illustrate the interests of the Left (now in power), and of the Working Class, and went on to state that human destiny, or the figure, represented in literature and art respectively, was the primary sign of a "humanism" that was so crucial to our society. In passing, they also attacked the Henry Moore exhibition, held in Belgrade in 1955, as being "reactionary". The Modernist editors of *Delo* (The Work), most of them writers, but also progressive art historians and artists who just began writing art criticism, were then accused by the realists of being "anarcho-individualists," of supporting "pro-French" (pro-Bretonian) conduct, of a "bourgeois consciousness," and of "anti-humanism". In this wing, though, the most important raised-voices were those of Serbian Surrealist writers who were members of Yugoslav CP before the Second World War. Although they were embarrassed by the French Left, which sided with the Stalinist line then (and refused to forgive Tito's rebellious act against Stalin in 1948), they believed that, in a Socialist society, art was an "organism" which evolves according its own rules. Regardless of the inner differences concerning figurative (Surrealist) and non-representational (abstract) art, the *Delo* intellectuals called for an "autonomy of art," asserting the idea that a work of art was a material "reality" of its own. They demanded a "freedom of expression" and "artistic pluralism" that would be central to our society, which, in itself, was "pluralistic"(it being multinational) and "humanist" (it being based on the idea of the Working Man - women were subsumed under the term "man"). The modernists' political arguments were also rather persuasive, as they referred to the economic practice considered unique in the Socialist hemisphere of that time: namely, that the autonomy of art should be put into practice in our Socialist society, which only two years ago, in 1953, had introduced a self-management model in the economy, thus fulfilling the Marxist dream of the proletariat-in-power. Furthermore, the modernists who, in the 1950s, argued that art was by no means a way of knowing/understanding the world (as the Socialist Realist "theory" claimed, when it insisted on art-as-education), but rather a way of creating, i.e. changing the world (as elaborated upon in the early Marx's theory). Thus, they introduced a shift from the gnoseological to ontological theoretical approach, which becomes fully elaborated upon in Serbian and Yugoslav Marxist philosophy (also by Praxis philosophers), but only in the late 60's and 70's.

The dividing up into two camps, in Serbian culture of the 50's - in which many intellectuals from SFRJ also took part - was in many ways similar to

the controversy over *Menschenbilder* (the images of man) in Germany,⁷ and the turbulence it caused greatly resembled the conflict which accompanied the *la Bataille réalisme-abstraction* in France⁸, with many overlappings, with discussions held on Modernism in Poland,⁹ and with Serbian modernists emerging from the battle as the winners, just when Modernist art was on the verge of becoming a new and (almost) compulsory aesthetics in Serbia. This was possible, at least in Serbia, because the Party could also be, and often was, disposed to alterations, and namely because of friendship between various modernist writers and members of the Serbian CP in high positions who sided with the *Delo* initiative. This was one of many indicators of the "spirit of comradeship" characteristic of Serbian and Balkan Communism.¹⁰ It was during this conflict that Serbian art was liberated from the influence of literature, and the door to "universal" and "contentless" art was flung wide open. Those who fought for this were to become leading figures in Serbia's cultural life in the 60's and 70's - professors at the Academy for Fine Arts, museum directors, commissioners for the Yugoslav pavilion at the Venice Biennial, and curators of other state-organized exhibitions of Yugoslav modernist art, held in the East (Bratislava and Prague, in 1958) and West. Abstract art began to officially represent the country at the Venice Biennial, beginning in 1954. At the Biennial in 1958, marking the triumph of postwar abstraction, the exhibited sculptures of a female artist from Serbia, Olga Jevrić, drew rather positive response in international circles. Her works, made of concrete and iron, and recognized as *la masse déchirée* were, however, well-observed by the modernist eye at large: in a review praising the artist's professional abilities, a (male) French art critic noted that she sculpted "in a powerful, manlike manner."¹¹ This observation could only be understood to mean that female artists - working within either a Communist or Capitalist context - were (capable of) making "universal" art.¹²

⁷ See Hans Belting, "Bilderstreit: ein Streit um die Moderne," in Siegfried Gohr and Johannes Gachnang (Eds.) *Bilderstreit. Widerspruch, Einheit und Fragment in der Kunst seit 1960*, ex. cat., Cologne: DuMont, 1989, 20-21; see also L. Glozer, *Westkunst*, op. cit., 216-226.

⁸ See Francis Francina, "The Politics of Representation," in P. Wood, F. Francina, J. Harris and C. Harrison, *Modernism in Dispute*, op. cit., 128-142.

⁹ See Piotr Piotrowski, "The 'Thaw'," in P. Piotrowski (Ed.) *Odwilz [The Thaw]*, ex. cat., Poznan: National Museum, 1996, p. 243-259 (Polish-English edition.); Piotr Piotrowski, "Art Versus History; History Versus Art," in *Art from Poland 1945-1996*, Warsaw: Galeria Sztuki Wspolczesnej Zacheta, 1997, 209-230.

¹⁰ Predrag J. Marković, *Beograd izmedju istoka i zapada 1948-1965 [Belgrade Between the East and the West 1948-1965]*, op. cit., 520. (Summary in English 515-524.)

¹¹ Pierre Gueguen, "Sculpture d'aujourd'hui," in *Aujourd'hui*, no.19, Paris 1958. Quoted in Ješa Denegri, *Pedesete: teme srpske umetnosti [The 1950's: Themes in Serbian Art]*, Novi Sad: Svetovi, 1993, 146.

¹² Between 1950 until 1990, only two female artists from Serbia were selected to take part in the collective Yugoslav presentations at *Giardini*. Besides Olga Jevrić, in 1960 there was another female sculptor, Olga Jančić. Statistics show that the chances of female artists living in our, at that time, brother-republics, were not much better. See Želimir Košević, *Venice Biennale and Yugoslav*

By the time that Tito made his several speeches against abstract art, the modernist models had already conquered Serbia's cultural landscape. In the speech held at the 7th Congress of the Yugoslav Youth, on January 23rd, in 1963 (soon after his visit to Moscow, where on December 17th, in 1962, Khrushchev voiced a similar initiative), Tito stated that he looked at art the way any "average man" did, and addressed artists by posing the question of whether or not "our reality provided a material rich enough for creative (artistic) work." He then remarked: Young artists "escape into abstraction, instead of shaping our reality..."¹³. His discontentment was short-lived owing to a pragmatic chain of events in Serbia, yet it generated an anti-Modernist campaign in the public sphere and led to conferences which focused on the role of art in our society, or Marxism and Art, held all over Serbia and SFRJ. Although Socialist Realism (and its marriage to Academic Realism) never ceased to exist in the domain of public sculpture, the most ambitious of sculpture projects, erected by the Serbian state in the 60's, were modernistic (or "abstract") in form, but of a "revolutionary" content - celebrating our Socialist Revolution, which coincided with our victory over the years of Fascism from 1941 to 1945. Although on many occasions public art in Serbia (and SFRJ) has been interpreted as "purely" abstract, a new reading of it demonstrates that such public sculpture, namely the most "official" of arts, must be seen as being "cryptically iconic."¹⁴ Its abstract shapes expressed the usual "rhetoric of power" (in this case, Communism), depicting in a schematized manner either military emblems or phalluses, which have always been successful in representing the best interests of power, East and West, South and North.

Late Socialist Aestheticism and Early "Laissez-faire Socialism"

The question as to whether Serbian abstract art played a role in the "collective cleaning" of the country after 1945, as was similarly the case in Germany,¹⁵ is yet to be answered. In Germany and France,¹⁶ the "cleansing process" ran parallel to a state-sponsored automatization and modernizing process, which, in both cases, resulted in an "Americanization of Everydayness." As for Serbia after the Revolution,¹⁷ the collective "body of the nation" needed to be cleansed foremost of the ruins caused by the Liberation War, but also of all the bourgeois "elements" of the ancien

Modern Art 1895-1988, ex. cat., Zagreb: Galerije grada Zagreba, 1988. Since FR Yugoslavia became a new state, in 1992, no female artist has ever been monographically represented in Venice.

¹³ Josip Broz Tito, *Govori i članci* [Speeches and Texts], Vol. XVIII, Zagreb: Naprijed, 1966, 76.

¹⁴ Ana Chave, "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," *Arts Magazine*, January 1990, 44-63.

¹⁵ See Katja von der Bey, "Maler und Hausputz im deutschen Wirtschaftswunder," in Kathrin Hoffmann-Curtius and Silke Wenk (Eds.) *Mythen von Autorschaft und Weiblichkeit im 20. Jahrhundert*, Marburg: Jonas Verlag, 1997, 234-244.

¹⁶ See Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies*, Cambridge, MA. and London: The MIT Press, 1995.

¹⁷ I tried discussing this aspect of Serbian culture in my essay on Marina Abramović, "Body Scenes: an Affair of the Flesh," in: Marina Abramović. *Artist Body*, Milano: Charta, 1998, particularly in the chapters "Clean Bodies" and "Plavi radion", 33-35.

régime, and the "anti-revolutionary" or Stalinist "elements" created during the nouveau régime. The latter were either expelled from the Party ranks, or occasionally sent on "business trips" i.e. to work in concentration camps, such as Goli Otok, an island in the Adriatic. The state-led electrification and (re)construction of the country and the teaching of a large portion of the Yugoslavian population to read and write - which coincided with the destalinisation - was commonly known as "normalization". In the late 60's, when comrades and comradeses of the SFRJ began developing consumer-oriented urges (for cars, TVs, vespas, electric appliances, and fashion) this brought about a marked embourgeoisement of the society, though not of the Working Man. A great many Yugoslav scholars were convinced that the period from 1953 to 1965 was a "Yugoslav economic miracle",¹⁸ and for some foreign observers, the year 1965 was, in fact, the beginning of our "Laissez-faire Socialism."¹⁹

During such a Socialism, Serbian modernist art, otherwise dominated by painting, became manifested with a "freedom of artistic expression" commonly accepted on European scale. Its repertoire oscillated between non-abstract and "figurative modernism," embracing forms of gestural Expressionism, re-evaluated here in the 50's; variations on "individualist and psychological painting" (Surrealism), and the revival of an intimate aesthetics (still life and portraiture), embracing nature and cityscapes. It was also comprised of "abstract modernism," like that of the paysage abstrait (Stojan Ćelić, Miodrag B. Protić), as well as associative and lyric abstraction. By the end of the 50's, when authorities established a more relaxed relationship to the "cosmopolitan nihilism" known as Existentialism (which before, never complied with the premise that our "optimistic" Socialism relied upon), the first Informel paintings were produced by Branko Protić, Branko Filo-Filipović, Olga Božičković-Popović, Mića Popović, and by others. For Lazar Trifunović, the art historian who followed, with as much passion as he did critical objectivity, the emergence of a Belgrade Informel art (1958-59), the years in which it flourished (1959-1963), and its slow death (1964-1979), Informel was "modern naturalism". This was the art, which brought about the "suicide of painting".²⁰ Observing Informel movement in the European context (but disregarding the radical Informel painters of Zagreb, in the early 60's) he defined it as an "art of crisis, the consequence of crisis and the expression of crisis".²¹ For him, Informel in

¹⁸ Predrag J. Marković, op. cit., 18.

¹⁹ Denis Rusinov, *The Yugoslav Experiment 1948-1974*, London 1977, quoted in Dragan J. Marković, op. cit., 18.

²⁰ Lazar Trifunović, "Moderni naturalizam" [Modern Naturalism], in *NIN*, Belgrade, 9. 10. 1960; L. Trifunović, "Samoubistvo slike" [Suicide of Painting], *Politika*, 27. 10. 1963.

²¹ Lazar Trifunović, *Enformel in Beogradu* [Informel in Belgrade], op. cit., 13

Serbia was a political art because it mirrored the very alienation at large in the society, and which disturbed the viewers (or rather our "Red bourgeoisie") because it deprived them of all the enjoyment and comforts that they expected from High Art.

In 1963, the Serbian writer, Sveta Lukić, stressing this deprivation, coined the phrase "Socialist Aestheticism".²² He opposed a "vulgar sociologism" of Socialist Realism and didn't see "formalism" (abstraction) as an "import" implemented by the capitalist West. Lukić, instead of expecting art to "shape reality" (as Tito did the same year), expected art to critically refer to it. He overtly criticized Serbian literature and visual art (both the abstract and informel) because, he said, they failed to establish any relation to first-hand reality, a stance that, in his view, befitted both the local bureaucratic structures and cultural snobbery. Ensuing reactions came from different sides: from Trifunović, who believed in Informel as a critical art; and from the artist and theoretician, Miodrag B. Protić (soon to become the first director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade), who defended the "autonomy of art". The opposing sides, nevertheless, had a Modernist ideal in common: they refused to accept the functionalizing of culture by daily politics, and upheld the notion that no work of art was to be reduced to an extra-artistic function. At the same time, the call for art's autonomy in a Communist country should not be devaluated. However, the shift from a "revolutionary to bourgeois art" (Trifunović) in Serbia, which took place between the years 1950 and 1960, was possible, and somehow easy, as the art produced in Serbia this century accepted Modernism as formulated in Paris, which was to say that it embraced an art which never manifested much interest in social issues but more so in the formal aspect of the art making. As a rule, our painters and art critics of the 60's spoke French, and they all referred to French art criticism (Herbert Read was, of course, an exception). The Serbian (Socialist) cultural authorities began sending them, in the late 40's, to Paris to improve their skills, and continued, as it were, political practices similar to those used by the Serbian Cultural Ministry before the Revolution. The art that they could see there now was a High Modernism à la parisienne, reworked remnants of the Paris School fading before the New York one. Artists that were active in Serbia at that time (and later) were interested in Picasso, and occasionally in Kandinsky and Chagall, but more often than not remained unappeased by the artistic and political experience of the Soviet Avant-garde. While it vacillated between an almost anionic painting, which overlooked the human figure,

²² Sveta Lukić, "Socijalistički estetizam. Jedna nova pojava" [Socialist Aestheticism. A new Phenomenon], *Politika* 28. 6. 1963. Quoted from S. Lukić, *Umetnost na mostu* [Art on the Bridge], Belgrade: Mala edicija ideja, 1975, 245.

and the schematized impulses from the living world (nature in particular), Modernist art in Serbia never actually reached a totally anionic stadium, that is, it never fulfilled the modernistic, evolutionist dream of "pure abstract," or zero form. It merely remained - une abstraction bavarde. The painting with iconic bases, like those of the ever-lasting Serbian liaison with Surrealism, survived in the Mediala group (Leonid Šejka, and later Dado Djurić, Vladimir Veličković) and was taken over by many of those affiliated with the New Figuration in the mid 60's. Only a few of these artists managed to turn artistically-away from the post-post Surrealist style, and towards the phenomenology of the everyday object (as in the paintings and objects of Dušan Otašević, for example) or geometrical and minimalist painting (Radomir Damjanović Damnjan, who began to produce non-materialized artworks in the early 70's.)

High Modernism, in either a non-representational or representational edition, could then become the official art ideology in Serbia because it was founded on the modernistic myth of the self-referentiality of the medium, the "rhetoric of purity," and on art's autonomy. Although the recent rewriting of Serbian art after 1945 gives emphasis to the damaging role of the Party's power over Serbian art productions,²³ one must keep in mind that the art which was censored was not abstract art, but rather a critical and "anti-modernist" realism.²⁴ An "autonomous", "independent", "cryptic and iconic" art - Socialist Modernism - like any modernistically-conscious style elsewhere, was not an art, which disturbed the existing social-political horizon. Simply put, apolitical High Modernism, made aware through Paris, could "work" not only in the "free world of the West" but also in Serbia or SFRJ, where it was accepted because it was a politically neutral art.

The New Art Practice

By the end of the 60's, the younger generation embraced SEX (in Serbian Black Wave films, showing darker sides of our "humanistic reality", many of which were banned), DRUGS (at home) and ROCK'N'ROLL (performed in large movie theatres or sports arenas, all displaying the photograph of Tito on their walls). One should also mention here that Yugoslav foreign

²³ See Zoran Gavrić, "Die Kunst in Serbien 1950-1990. Ein kunsthistorisches Impromptu," in Peter Weibel, Christa Steinle (Eds.), *Identität: Differenz, Tribuene Trigon 1940-1990, Eine Topographie der Moderne, ex-cat.*, Wien/Köln/Wiemar: Böhlau Verlag, 1992, 130-148; Lidija Merenk, "The Yugoslav Experience, or What Happened to Socialist realism?," in *Moscow Art Magazine*, No. 22, 71-77.

²⁴ Mića Popović, an ex-*Informel* artist and film director whose films were on "ice" till the late 1980's, was usually considered the only "real" dissident figure in the Serbian art world of the 1970's because of his *Solemn Painting* (1974), in which the artist "quoted" a photograph from the press, but eternalized in oil: the picture of Tito and his wife, together with the Belgian queen and king.

politics, which oscillated between the West and the East, did, in fact, effect cultural life in Belgrade,²⁵ which became a kind of playground for state-curated exhibitions of Soviet art (1959), and would soon be "answered" by state-organized exhibitions of contemporary American art (1961). The truly international climate intensified when the Museum of Contemporary Art opened in 1965 (conceptually modeled after the MoMa in New York), where numerous international exhibitions of the historic, avant-garde movement of the 20's, along with modern and contemporary art exhibitions, as well as an historic rectification in general of 20th century Modernism in the Yugoslav lands²⁶.

For the various manifestations of post-object art, which appeared in SFRJ around 1968, art critics generally used the term "New Art Practice".²⁷ Under this general heading were embraced earth works, "epistemological" conceptual art, process art, anti-forms, arte povera, video and films by artists, analytic painting, as well as body-related works of art, and "other music". This term, New Art Practice, was the inception of the new vocabulary which both artists educated by modernist professors teaching at the Academy of Fine Arts in Belgrade and those autodidactic artists, as well as critics, all took hold of intending to distance themselves from the art production that surrounded them. This art was called the "other art" or "new art", but was also recognized as the "other line" or "parallel art".²⁸ This new generation emerged in 1969 in Vojvodina (The Bosch+Bosch Group, from Subotica, and KOD Group were founded 1970 in Novi Sad) and then, later, in Belgrade. They introduced the idea of art-as-practice, and instigated the shift from art as a "universal language" to art as an individual "language" or as a "body as language". They refused the notion of "artistic poetics" which, at least in Serbia, dominated

²⁵ For the exhibition of international art held in Belgrade see Ješa Denegri, *Jedna moguća istorija moderne umetnosti. Beograd kao internacionalna umetnička scena 1965-1998* [A Possible History of Modern Art. Belgrade as an International Art Scene 1965-1998], Belgrade: Društvo istoričara umetnosti, 1998.

²⁶ Yugoslav Modernism in painting was studied in the series, the "decade exhibition". Each catalogue was edited by Miodrag B. Protić, Museum Director, and contributors were art historians and curators for all of the Yugoslav republics, with a short summary in French: 1900-1920 held in 1973; The Third Decade (1920-1939) in 1967; The Fourth Decade (1930-1940) in 1971; The Fifth Decade (1950-1960) in 1980. Yugoslav Sculpture 1870-1950 held in 1975. Belgrade: Museum of Contemporary Art. The art historian Ješa Denegri recently published a series of books dedicated to Serbian art from 1950 to today under the common title of *Teme srpske umetnosti* [Themes in Serbian Art]: *Pedesete* [The Fifties], 1993; *Šesdesete* [The Sixties], 1995; *Sedamdesete* [The 1970's], 1996; *Osamdesete* [The 1980's], 1997; *Devedesete* [The 1990's], 1999. Novi Sad: Svetovi.

²⁷ See Marjan Susovski (Ed.), *The New Art Practice*, ex. cat, Zagreb: Gallery of Contemporary Art, 1978.

²⁸ See *Nova umetnost u Srbiji 1970-1980* [New Art in Serbia], ex. cat., Belgrade: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1983; Ješa Denegri, "Razlog za drugu liniju" [The Reason for the Other Line], in *Jugoslovenska dokumenta II*, ex. cat., Sarajevo: Collegium Artisticum, 1989; and J. Denegri, "Teze za drugu liniju," [The Theses On the Other Line], *Quorum* no.1, Vol. VII, Zagreb, 1991; Bojana Pejić, "L' art parallele yougoslave," (Dossier yougoslave), *Artistes* no. 12, Paris, Aout/Septembre 1982, 7-10.

art/criticism, and opted for the concept/term of an artistic attitude. The artists who interested this generation were Malevich and Duchamp. The linguistic change was also important: This generation spoke English and was as well-informed about modernistic American art as about the "primary theory" written by Minimalist and Conceptual artists, with whom some of them even worked on common projects.²⁹

The benefit - also a disadvantage - of all this, experienced by the New Art Practice protagonists in Serbia was that this art was then introduced or shown by public galleries part of universities, or youth organizations. In Vojvodina such a place was the Tribina Mladih Gallery, in Novi Sad, and in Belgrade, the Student Cultural Center (SKC), inaugurated in April 1971. SKC, part of the University in Belgrade, served the function of an institute for contemporary art.³⁰ Since its opening, Zoran Popović, Neša Paripović, Gergelj Urkom, Raša Todosijević, Slobodan Era Milivojević, and Marina Abramović - who never constituted a group - began to exhibit together. The SKC Gallery was clearly a place, which incited the presentation of both national and international "new art" (for instance, with its April Meeting - The Expanded Media Festival, which was held each year, from 1972 to 1977). The programs of the SKC were financed by the University of Belgrade University, meaning that it relied on the city, i.e. on public funding. By stressing this fact, I only want to suggest the amount of control there was at that time over cultural institutions, was not exposed to bare censorship, but occasionally appearing on the level of, say, cutting back the funding for the programs. The existence of such a place, also a public gallery, meant that the New Art Practice did not belong to underground or dissident culture. But despite the SKC Gallery being so professionally curated, it was still part of the University of Belgrade and, consequently, the art with a contestational spirit displayed there was linked with "experiments" otherwise characteristic "youth". Therefore, though it might be shown in public, at a state-funded gallery, a political performance by Raša Todosijević, for example, could never have been seen as a dangerous act liable to "destabilize" our socialist routine. Besides that, a performance of this nature could have never be considered "political art," since to mention politics at all, in so politicized a Socialist living situation, would have been immediately interpreted as an "anti-political" (read anti-state) gesture. As such, despite the fact that the New Art Practice could be produced in a Communist country, it remained marginalized by the Yugoslav "art system". This art system did not, of course, function on the basis of the market

²⁹ See for example Zoran Popović and Jasna Tijardović, "A Note on Art in Yugoslavia," in *Fox* Vol. I, No. 1, 1975, 49-52.

³⁰ Friedemann Malsch, "Das Studentski kulturni centar," in *Kunstforum* No. 117, 194-200.

premise; nor was it a system fully-controlled by the Communist power apparatus.³¹ It was a network, established by Yugoslav-based contemporary art museums whose criteria was founded on modernist notions, originality, respected authorship, and adored works of art conceived in the eternal media of painting or sculpture. In contrast to the Gallery of Contemporary Art in Zagreb (today the Museum), which acquired "new art" in the 70's, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade has occasionally shown Serbian Conceptual artists in group and individual shows since 1973, but failed to provide this art with a proper historic foundation - as it failed to acquire the major works for its collection in time (neither then nor later).

The Art Practice remained excluded from the international "Neo-avant-garde" as well. From the Western (and Leftist) point of view, this "non-commercial vacuum" and "Tito's original brand of Communism", as Andrew Gibbon Williams enthusiastically wrote in 1990, "inadvertently did the country's artists a great favor: they have been obliged to evolve modes of expression - often antagonistic and anarchic - under the indirect influence of Western art, but without any of the deadening politesse which the market demands."³² But the absence of the market, intensified by the fact the country occupies a peripheral cultural-position in Europe, is what exaggerates the idea that only the Serbian artists who left the country and worked in the international "art system" gained any international recognition.

The Time of the Iconodules

In contrast to the previous generation, open to the use of iconoclastic strategies, the "iconodules" of the 80's rediscovered the *jouissance en peinture*,³³ which accompanied the postmodern "myth of permissiveness" and the "anything-goes" manner of thought. Neo-conservatism, and the tight connection between the *operazione pittura* and art market of the 80's affected the Serbian art in a specific way. Since an art market did not exist (but which didn't exclude private collecting), the "new image" painting which emerged in Belgrade and Serbia around 1980 was welcomed by Socialist museums, depending on public funding: its musealisation, historicification, i.e. acquisition started almost immediately, namely in

³¹ Ješa Denegri, An Interview, *Artistes* no. 12, Paris, Aout/Septembre 1982, 10-14.

³² Gibbon Willias, "The Creative Benefits of the Non-Commercial Vacuum," in *FRA YU KULT*, cat. ex., Široki Brijeg: Museum Široki Brijeg (Collection of Franciscan Monastery) 1990, 10.

³³ Bojana Pejić, "Vreme ikonodula" [The Time of Iconodules], *Polja*, No. 289, Novi Sad, March 1983, 1-2.

1983.³⁴ Since the painting-boom caused much confusion - most of the Serbian (figurative, Surrealist and realist) painters claimed they were "always postmodern" - it became necessary to establish a borderline. The critics who discussed this form of art from within, and who belonged to the new generation, Lidija Merenik in particular, stressed the major shift which took place in Belgrade during the "roaring eighties": the inter-connection which existed between the visual artists and pop culture. This generation differs greatly from the conceptual practitioners of the 70's, those almost without any active or working relation to popular or mass culture. The New Wave and Punk musicians, painters, photographers, architects, and the young television directors, working at TV Belgrade, shaped in unison a truly urban spirit (and night life) in the Belgrade of eighties.³⁵

"New wave" painters in Serbia were less enthusiastic about the neo-expressionistic German version, or for the Italian transavantgarde, than those living in Slovenia and Croatia. Although the first part of the decade both painting and sculpture were more gestural (Alter Imago Group), most "new" artists chose, instead of the figurative, merely forms that were beyond representational art. In this way, the narrative and story-telling effect was greatly reduced and/or excluded. In the second part of the 80's, Merenik recognized the "unexpressive" stance, orientations towards minimalism, the geometric, and "low key" expression(ism). Instead of resolving the painterly problems on the canvas, which appealed a few of the artists of the older generation, recognized as relevant for the painterly spirit of time, the younger artists evinced a greater interest in making installations, in working in the actual gallery space. Instead of the finished or "eternal" artwork, instead of stretched canvas with their precise and unchangeable (and salon) shapes, and instead of the tableau-procedure, most of the works produced in Belgrade were fragmented, open, adaptable to found spatial situations, and therefore ephemeral in nature.

There were basically two "genres" of installations. The first was comprised of painterly-oriented works in which artists used either canvases or paper as mere image-supports, and then made use of these as fragments (still able to exist as single works). Among those working in this fashion, three artists in particular, employing totally different approaches, sought to re-invent the Byzantine-Serbian past - the tradition of the medieval fresco and icon tradition: Milovan Marković, Mileta Prodanović and Veso Sovilj, who then reformed their heritage by suppressing its basic ground, and who avoided its figurative and, therefore, narrative basis. The other genre of

³⁴ See *Umetnost osamdesetih* [The Art of the 1980's], ex. cat., Belgrade: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1983.

³⁵ See Lidija Merenik, *Beograd: osamdesete* [Belgrade: The Eighties], Novi Sad: Prometej, 1995.

installation relied upon its sculptural means. In this case, the gallery space was filled with accumulated shapes made of poor materials (cardboard, metal pipes and wood), and with sculptures whose surfaces were treated in a painterly manner, like in Mrdjan Bajić's work. This fragmented artwork on the one side, and an interest in the actual and three-dimensional space on the other, and the two modes were carried out by artists who had once formed the "hard core" of Serbian conceptual art (Todosijević, Paripović, Milivojević), and who, without ever ceasing to be actively present in the scene, often showed together with the "new".

No Serbian artist of the time was so involved in deconstructivist procedures as Goran Djordjević, who began questioning the inherited modernist notion of authorship and artistic originality, as well as the reception of the historical avant-garde (citing Malevich and Mondrian, for example) and introducing the idea of art-as-copy. His art of simulation, which did, in fact, refer to the Modernist and the avant-garde concept of uniqueness, could also be read in the context of the local art, which traditionally occupied a marginal position, with its artists often seen as the "imitators" of art made in a remote Center.

From relying either on appropriation procedures of the national past, or on international "art languages," the Serbian scene of the 80's failed to bring about an art which could deal with the given, official representation of politics (as in Slovenia with the NSK, or in Croatia, in Mladen Stilinović's work). The process of undoing the Socialist-realist models, as well as references to the Soviet avant-garde, occurred in the mass culture, namely in the "new wave" music group, Dečaci (Malčiki), and cultural programs of Belgrade TV, specializing in rock-music productions. In this sense, as Dejan Sretenović contended, "nobody really knows what actually happened with Communism in the former Yugoslavia, since there was never a radical and ideological demobilization in the country; it just plunged into political and ethnic conflicts, and ended in this bloody disintegration."³⁶

A Low Reality

The general quest for the "aesthetic dimension" of art, an art "above" the "dirty" politics, survived in the Serbian context until the late 90's, during which time the Serbian nationalist program and the (virtual or actual) exclusion of the Other (meaning other nations and ethnical entities)

³⁶ Dejan Sretenović, "Art in a Closed Society," in D. Sretenović (Ed.) *Art in Yugoslavia 1992-1995*, Belgrade: Fund for an Open Society - Center for Contemporary Arts, 1996, no pagination.

became an everyday reality, and Serbia (or FR Yugoslavia) became involved in three wars from 1991 to 1995. Even before the Kosovo War and NATO bombardment of FRY (1999) such a "society of danger" had cherished a "culture of safety": "What the thin layer of the bourgeoisie, the champions of the great game of psychological repression had especially identified with the never-lived 'belle époque' was the concept of culture, of Culture which in these 'murky times,' was the only thing that could remain de-politicized, non-partisan, above party politics, beautiful, autonomous, elevating, and consoling."³⁷

The disintegration of the SFRJ, and the establishment of the "third" FR Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro) in 1992, did not prevent most of the Serbian artists and intellectuals from sharing the same Modernist dream of "art's autonomy". Between 1992 and 1995, when FR Yugoslavia was exposed to an almost complete isolation from the external world,³⁸ the art produced in such a "closed society" was most exposed to an inner restructuring. The artistic condition in Serbia found itself wedged between an aggressive, nationalistic-populism (also constructed by the mass media, and by the Serbian television network in particular) on one the hand, and the absent, or only occasional, contact with the international (art) world on the other. It developed a "Robinson's Syndrome" of loneliness and isolation.³⁹

Apart from the artist who, during this period, organized anti-war works (Balint Szombathy), anti-war events (street actions and projects such as Ice Art), or more critical artworks, such as *Gott liebt die Serben* (God Loves The Serbs), a series of installations by Raša Todosijević, initiated in 1989, Belgrade's art communities developed essentially two visual politics: an art recognized as the "Second Modernism" or the "Modernism after Postmodernism" (geometrical investigations, neo-Konkrete Kunst, or post-conceptual procedures) based on the idea of a non-representational art with an absence of subject matter, and a "deconstructivist" art, employing a variety of representational means. In its treatment of eroticized narratives (like sexuality, as in works by Jovan Ćekić and Zoran Naskovski) or public issues (nationalism, xenophobia, and racism), it relies to heavily on self-representations (Milica Tomić). Either as fixed pictures (photography, painting) or "unstable" images (video art and computer-manipulated

³⁷ Branislava Andjelković and Branislav Dimitrijević, "Murder or Happy People," in B. Andjelković and B. Dimitrijević (Eds.), *Murder One*, ex. cat., Belgrade Fund for an Open Society - Center for Contemporary Arts, 1997

³⁸ The UN Security Council Resolution 757 (30 May 1992) economic sanctions were imposed on FRY due to its involvement in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and also applied to all scientific, cultural and sport activities. Following the peace talks in Dayton, on November 21, 1995, the process of the gradual lifting of sanctions has started. Since January 1999 until today, however, newer sanctions have been enforced because of the Kosovo War.

³⁹ Dejan Sretenović, "Art in a Closed Society," op. cit.

imagery), this art carries out the concept of artwork as a fragmented "whole" and opts for collage/montage procedures.

Over the last fifty years, the art made in Serbia has always had trouble establishing links with a concrete reality. In contrast to other Socialist countries, where until the end of the 80's one could follow the split between the official and unofficial (underground and dissident) art, often based on the Modernist premise as well, the Serbian (as well as the Yugoslav) artistic intelligentsia experienced - and, at times, even incited - another type of a gap. Having High Art, that is, abstract art, as an officially supported art, and having the New Art Practice as an art which, though marginalized, was shown nationally and internationally, Serbian art and its critics - myself included - treated all of the aspects of Yugoslav Socialist reality as "low". In today's Serbia, where reality is frightening because of the political and/or economic instability, crime and social insecurity, xenophobia and international isolation, the question of "art's autonomy" is, as it always was, a political issue. Referring to Serbian art productions of the late 90's, which they saw as art asking "unpleasant questions," the art critics Branislava Andjelković and Branislav Dimitrijević contended: "The reason that someone feels the need to engage in political art, after all, is then not so much a matter of art's ability to change the world, but of its ability to change itself in relation to the world, in its inability to exclude itself from the surrounding world, and, finally, in its desire to subvert and provoke the ideological mechanisms which threaten it."⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Branislava Andjelković and Branislav Dimitrijević, "Murder or Happy People," op.cit, 27.