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Shaping the Grand Compromise: The
case of blending the mainstream and
dissident art in Serbia, c. 1948-1974

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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.

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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.

Branislav Dimitrijević

Shaping the Grand Compromise: The case of blending the mainstream and dissident art in Serbia, c. 1948-1974

One of the general conclusions about the Yugoslav art after the Second World War¹, is that it was not affected by the dogma of Socialist Realism as happened in other countries which became single party states soon after 1945. Only the brief period marked by Tito's break with Stalin in 1948 is considered the period when Socialist Realism was the official style that was dedicatedly followed both by those artists who were involved with leftist social art of the 30's, and by those who were considered bourgeois in their inclination towards Parisian modernism. After 1948, as the argument goes, it took only a couple of years to completely break off with socialist realism, and modernism was adopted as a lingua franca of visual arts. As a consequence, a work of art was no longer obliged to represent the socialist reality, but to enhance artistic "freedom and self-awareness" as a necessity to create a new *Weltanschauung* of the "post-revolutionary generation".² This trend of safe modernism (abstract painting and sculpture with reduced representational references) was labeled by a literature critic Sveta Lukić³ as Socialist aestheticism, and later by some other critics with a more general term Socialist Modernism. The very idea behind this is ultimately but inadvertently greenbergian: content is to be

¹ As in other texts discussing only partially the art-practice in the country that was called the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, it is not easy to make a distinction between what was Serbian, Croatian or Slovene art. This text is mostly taking into consideration art events located in Serbia, but given that the capital city was on that territory as well, all of these and other events included artists that were not of Serbian nationality.

² These are the words of the chief protagonist of Socialist aestheticism, Miodrag B. Protić, who initiated and established the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade. See M.B. Protić, *Jugoslovensko slikarstvo šeste decenije – nove pojave*, in *Jugoslovensko slikarstvo šeste decenije* (exh. catalogue), Muzej savremene umetnosti, Beograd 1980.

³ Sveta Lukić, *Socijalistički estetizam*, *Politika*, Belgrade, 28.04.1963.

dissolved and subject matter was something “to be avoided like the plague”.⁴

One can be very much tempted to conclude (given the split between the form and content dominant in the art discourse of the time) that the form of official Yugoslav art was Modernist and the content Socialist-Realist. However, it is not the readable content of images or objects that was socialist-realist but simply the whole state organized art system was. It was, in a sense, a grand compromise.⁵ A compromise between the ideological demands of those speaking in the name of the working class (the class that somehow did not include artists) and the already built-in art practices of the bourgeoisie. It is striking that Socialist Realism in Serbia did not engender any artists that had not been known previously, and that the only *Homo novus* was Boža Ilić who was risen to a socialist stardom in the course of months and then instantly forgotten (in a slightly Stalinist manner) when this style was no longer considered hegemonic. When some writers later reviewed works by Ilić, they tried not to consider him a socialist-realist but rather a socialist-romanticist, having in mind a great deal of naïveté this artist had in relation to political frameworks.⁶ Other artists were not that naïve, they were really realists. Political realists. Yugoslavia was the only socialist country where, in Belgrade, the Museum of Contemporary art was established back in 1965, and more importantly established by a painter who was not even the member of the Party, Miodrag B. Protić. In my opinion, the atmosphere of the grand compromise fully shaped the future discursive practices in Serbian art and writing on art. It simply left the door closed for art to become more critical and less anti-avantgarde than in the Western countries of developed capitalism. Until the late sixties there was no explicit break of this compromise. Tito warned a couple of times of the danger of abstract art, but these warnings, which could have been considered a major threat if spoken about some other activity (economic or education policy, for instance) was overcome by the existence of artists who remained loyal to a tradition of portrait painting where Tito's face was an omnipresent theme. The quintessential rule was created: there was some critical freedom possible but only if it did not address the president personally. Towards the end of his life Tito signed the law that regulated the use of the most important state symbols that are the flag, the emblem, the anthem and the "image and name of the President of the republic". In the article 29 of

⁴ Clement Greenberg, *Avant-Garde and Kitsch* (1939.) in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, Vol. 1., Chicago 1986.

⁵ For more on this term see: B. Dimitrijević, *The Grand Compromise: On examples of the use of political references in Serbian art of the 90's, and its historical background*, in *Strategije predstavljanja, Svet umetnosti, SCCA Ljubljana, Ljubljana 2002.*

⁶ The famous dissident artist Mića Popović was the first to propose this definition at the opening of the come-back exhibition of Ilić in ULUS Gallery, Belgrade, May 1990.

this law it says: "in premises of the federal organs the photographs of the president may be displayed, but only those that are approved by the federal organ dealing with the affairs of science and culture"⁷. In case of the president, Socialist Realism never died. His image was fully protected of different styles and interpretations.

The formalist discourse that encompassed the visual art production prevented any direct allusions to politics but in the same time influenced mechanisms of decision-making of various forums organized by the Party through which scholarships or study trips could be arranged, commissions given, etc. For example, probably the biggest dissident when talking about visual arts (N.B. there are considerably bigger number of examples in film or literature), painter Mića Popović was one of the first artists to receive a grant for a study trip abroad (three months in Paris) back in 1950.⁸ This happened after his first solo show in Belgrade, which has been generally considered path breaking in relation to the Soc-Realist dogma. Historian Predrag Marković rightly points out that there was another event that happened six months before this one which allowed local artists to behave more freely in relation to the tradition of modernist art, and that was the exhibition of "New French Fine Art" from the famous Shlomovich collection and the collection of the prince Paul Karadjordjević. The show included works of Van Gogh, Rouault, Matisse, Picasso, and many others. I think that it is quite indicative how one of the leading communists, Veljko Petrović, made a speech at the opening which summed up the position of the Party (at least its intellectual part) and inaugurated the grand compromise between the communist aspirations and the bourgeois tradition of art: these "pure bourgeois artists ... opened the eyes of humanity for grace and subtle pathos of statures and movements of the small man, the man in the mass, during work, relaxation, play... this, so called, decadent art is full of technical inventions, ideas, colouristic and linear subtleties ... that will be used in decorative painting in future, in some more ordered and healthier times. We are not preventing ourselves from exhibiting the works of these artists. We want our man, our working Socialist man, not to be deprived of anything that is human"⁹

The most apparent paradox in these words is that it appears that the bourgeois modernism is the art style for some better, happier times in future that were in Yugoslavia usually defined only with one word: Communism. This moderate mode of employing the socialist jargon of the

⁷ Quoted in Bojana Pejić, *Tito, ili ikonizacija jedne predstave*, u D. Sretenović (ed.), *Novo čitanje ikone*, Geopoetika, Centar za savremenu umetnost, Beograd 1999, p. 114.

⁸ See Predrag J. Marković, *Beograd između istoka i zapada, 1948-1965*, Službeni list, Beograd 1996, p. 245.

⁹ Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 421.

times for the purposes not strictly associated with dominant political and economic trends was spoken in opposition to a strict line of more hard-line Party “spokesmen” who attacked any form of modernism, i.e. formalism, by even presenting them as a denial of art as such. A rather well known Croatian art historian, who later abandoned his hard-line attitudes, provoked by his visit to Venice Biennale in 1948 and particularly by work of Henry Moore, wrote these lines: “From Manet to Moore there is a closed line with an internal dialectic that can offer a classic example of an important phenomenon – how one great culture is denigrated to primitive stuttering, how one class denies art and artistic knowledge of reality because it denies reality as such”¹⁰. This kind of rhetoric was not to be abandoned the next thirty years, and it continued to be spoken even after Tito died. However, this time from the mouths of right-wing conservatives who understood modernism exactly like this: as a deviation produced by their own bourgeois class.

It is important to emphasize that both the alleged disappearance of Socialist Realism after 1948/50, and the appearance of critical art practices in the 60's, had been strictly controlled affairs and the result of an intellectual infiltration of non-communists in the official structures. There was simply no considerable resistance to modernism especially in the field of visual art, as opposed to literature. For instance, the person who spoke about this non-existence of any relevant “anti-modernist” visual artist was Miodrag B. Protić, the first director of Belgrade MOCA.¹¹ Apart from occasional and very mild witch-hunts (for example the one after Tito's speech against abstract art in 1963), there was no resistance to development of modernist art including the very bourgeois values promoted by it. These values were generally fixed by the trend of so called “intimist painting” in the 30's, inspired by Parisian art scene, that was reintegrated in the Serbian art community after the mentioned French exhibition in 1950. To show that this kind of bourgeois mainstream stepped towards a high place in official ideology in socialism, we can clearly notice that the only artistic movement that was systematically cut out of any debates was the period of avantgarde movements of the 20's that had clearly leftist political aspirations. Similar happened to the crucial period of conceptualism in the 70's, or “new art practice”, that will not be discussed in this text. Before we proceed to see how critical attitudes were developed within the climate of the grand compromise, it may be interesting to see what happened to those who expected the socialist revolution to make impact in the field of arts as it did in the economic policy or other social fields. Apart

¹⁰ Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 418.

¹¹ See M.B. Protić, *Srpsko slikarstvo XX veka*, Beograd 1970, p. 405.

from the almost forgotten artists who were identified with the post-war Socialist Realism, like the unfortunate Boža Ilić, many artists had been members of the Communist Party, and even fought in the revolution. They remained in certain Party structures (or in the Union of Artists) and protested against bourgeois tendencies in art. But surprisingly their voice, allegedly the voice of official cultural policy, was not heard beyond the usual propaganda that aimed at wider masses of people. One of them, the Bosnian painter Ismet Mujezinović, who joined the Partisan forces at the beginning of the war in 1941, and was decorated with “Partizanska spomenica” (“Partisans’ remembrance medal), most often complained that “to be a Marxist is almost an illegal activity nowadays”, and that “everyone is now ridiculing Marxist aesthetics”¹². There is even a document, which mentions a demand made by Mujezinović to the Commission for International Cultural Relations to include a figurative painter in one of the exhibitions of Yugoslav art abroad. The reply he was given was that those kinds of paintings might be sent only to exhibitions in under-developed countries. One of the participants at the meeting said that none of the Party members reacted, afraid not to be qualified as primitives and conservatives.¹³

Thanks to professor Ješa Denegri, I have recently come across a monograph on Ismet Mujezinović where he found one particularly striking image. By reading this book it appeared as certain that Mujezinović took his artistic practice simply as a part of his revolutionary feelings, the way to express his ideological inclinations and to commemorate the harsh struggle after which the socialist system was achieved. He did paint a number of his self-portraits that made this story more personal, but there is one he started in 1966 and finished in 1970 that is particularly striking. It shows him now as an old man, but still vital and lean, as standing shirt-less with his palette and with his famous partisan medal attached to his naked body. It appears that Mujezinović painted this picture in 1966 as a straightforward self-portrait in the studio, and that the four years later the medal was added including the bleeding wound it caused.¹⁴ Mujezinović who before 1966 many times stressed a sense of betrayal of fundamental Marxist positioning of arts and culture in Yugoslav society, in the years of the second half of the 60's - when many economic and political revisions were made, and when students' demonstrations attacked the old Party members who prevented the rejuvenation of the political system – his

¹² Documents from a painters' Party meeting in 1956, as quoted in P.J. Marković, *Beograd izmedju istoka i zapada, 1948-1965*, p. 425.

¹³ See *Ibid.*

¹⁴ In a footnote in a text for a large monograph on this artist there is information that the "Remembrance medal" was painted later as a "contribution to polemics on modern art in expressing the artist's stance that "all genuine art is revolutionary". Ibrahim Krzović, *O djelu, Ismet Mujezinović, Galerija jugoslovenskog portreta, Tuzla 1985*.

disappointment took a shape of an ultimate pathos. Within the current political and cultural climate he felt as a loser. What remained of him was his aging naked body, his traditional painterly skills, and his medal which was to become a status symbol but not in the sphere of culture. This sphere was by the end of the 60's mostly inhabited by non-communist, still afraid to say openly that they were anti-communist, but achieving various levels of political criticism especially by using and manipulating political references and symbols. As I stressed above, the only symbol that was to remain untouchable was the name and the image of the President.

Another common place in art historiography in Serbia is that during the sixties the first voices of opposition to mainstream cultural activities had been heard. This was the time when 'dissident' cultural projects made a strong impact in the intellectual circles and wider in the social sphere. It was not as difficult to be a dissident in Titoist Yugoslavia as it was in the countries of the Soviet bloc. Some of them had been verbally attacked by the Party apparatchiks, but still had an opportunity to use government money for their films or other projects. Only the major rule applied: Tito, as "the image and the name", was not to be touched. And in fact only those works that directly and critically alluded to his personality were seriously dealt with and their authors got arrested, and many others shaped their means within limits of the permitted. In Yugoslav cinema of the 60's and early 70's there are plenty of examples of political subversion that aimed at playing (and sometimes openly mocking) socialist standards including certain allusions to the President. One of the most famous filmmakers, Dušan Makavejev, made the film *Innocence Unprotected* (1968) in which he made a subtle analogy between the character of the "Serbian Houdini" Aleksić – who produced the first Serbian sound film about his adventures during the Nazi occupation – and the President Tito. This analogy was apparent but too subtle to cause an open reaction because this reaction will simply recognize the fact that the aging President is as pompous and funny as Aleksić. In the field of visual arts, on the other hand, there are probably only two well-known examples when artists made open allusions about the President. Both of them illustrate the position of the bourgeois dissident intelligentsia in relation to the dominant ideology and its practical implications.

It took 24 years after the first show by Mića Popović in order for one art show to be banned by the authorities. This happened in 1974 when Popović wanted to exhibit his *Ceremonial* painting, painted after a newspaper photograph taken at the meeting of President Tito and his wife with the Dutch Royal couple. This painting somehow was too much for the authorities. It showed that both couples in this painting were visualized as "ruling families", it showed a stark contrast between the glamour of the

setting and costumes, and the grim reality of guest workers (Gastarbeitern) from Yugoslavia that left for developed countries like the Netherlands.¹⁵ This painting goes along a path taken by a number of artists since the late sixties, when the renewal of figurative art attempted to achieve some form of social critique.¹⁶ It was very difficult to identify the ideological position of these artists, but there were typical Serbian dissidents: productive; multidisciplinary (some of them like Popović appeared as painters, film or theatre directors, writers...); trend-setting (Popović, for example, departed from his revolt against Socialist Realism and his interest in medieval art and folklore at the beginning of the 50's, and moved through his first abstractions and his "Enformel" period towards the end of 50's and early 60's, and finally arrived at his figurative social painting of the 70's); etc. However, Popović's work also marks a fundamental split that happened in the 70's when a new generation of artists belonging to the conceptualist circle questioned the whole position of an official dissident and departed, both politically and artistically, in a completely different direction. Popović's work was artistically not radical, it was illustrative and literary, and for a number of critics and artists the radical change of artistic practice was a prerequisite for politicization of art. Strangely enough Popović's work was much more appreciated in literary circles where his realism was fully understood and "read" than among the radical art community that got organized around the Student's Cultural Centre in Belgrade.¹⁷

In 1969, after serving his military service, the Belgrade painter Dušan Otašević organized a show of his painted wooden objects, made under the influence of the American Pop-art but with many local particularities and associations. Otašević (1940) belonged to a generation of artists who first posed the question of the actual domination of French-type modernism and of abstract painting as representative of this ideology. "New figuration", or as Denegri more correctly calls it "New objectness", was to reintroduce the notion of representation and the overall referential capacity of art, but instead of using flat rectangular surfaces Otašević constructed objects-surfaces inspired by scenery, signs and assemblages of everyday life. Most of the Otašević's works are polyptiches in which, as Denegri wrote, the status of an existing object is transformed to a materiality of the object, that, "in place of an initial singularity of meaning, opens up a field of ambiguity

¹⁵ See Jovan Despotović, *Neizbežnost ponavljanja in Svečana slika nekad i sad*, CZKD, Beograd 1997.

¹⁶ There are many misunderstandings that add to the mythical status of this banned exhibition. Popović himself mentions another painting at the show that provoked crucial controversy, the one that depicts Tito in his private zoo behind a giraffe. See Milan Nikodijević, *Zabranjeni bez zabrane*, Jugoslovenska kinoteka, Beograd, 1995, p. 125.

¹⁷ It is interesting that the affair with Popović's painting did not even get mentioned in the most comprehensive survey of art in Serbia since the WW2 written by Ješa Denegri in 5 volumes. The volume about the art scene of the 70's (*Sedamdesete: Teme srpske umetnosti*, Svetovi, Novi Sad, 1996) is almost entirely dedicated to "New art practice" of the Belgrade and Novi Sad conceptualism.

and plurality of interpretations”¹⁸. At the mentioned show in 1969, Otašević exhibited an object entitled *Comrade Tito, the white violet; you are beloved by our Youth* that referred to a famous poem celebrating the President. The work consisted of painted aluminum flag of Yugoslavia and the red flag of the Communist International that are surrounding a portrait of Tito painted after one of the famous and omnipresent photographs of him in the Partisan uniform. From the documents of the time, it is impossible to make more sense out of this work. The text for the exhibition catalogue does not mention this work, so there is feeling that this installation was smuggled in the exhibition without creating much fuss about it. The formalist discourse of art writing fully allowed no political references to be mentioned even when so provocative works were discussed.¹⁹ However, it is quite apparent that this ironising with the key political emblem of Titoism (i.e. the image of Tito himself) gathered different factions of dissidents under one compromising solution, quite readable for the wider cultural scene in Serbia that constructed its identity through moderate political dissidence. When Otašević chose this kind of political installation as ideologically indicative for the absurd but benign direction that the Titoist ideology was taking, he recognized the visual framework of Yugoslav socialism as some kind of setting, of *mis-en-scene*, which shaped the everyday environment and which was the only outcome of "Marxist aesthetics". "High art" was not the site where the interpretation of socialist aesthetics took place, *socialism* rightly departed from the sphere of fine arts and left this space for western-orientated bourgeois art. The space of everyday life was, on the contrary, shaped by the aesthetics which was to become identified as typically socialist: Party conferences settings, public space arrangements, department stores displays, etc. Titoism had become a setting, rather than an ideology, and had been usually treated by its opponents with some kind of distance that created the sense of irony and ambivalence as the main tool for critically dealing with it. In the private spheres, the aesthetics of Socialism was ridiculed at the bourgeois soirees, publicly this form of criticism took shape in some kind of ambiguousness that secured the minimum recognizability of the critical act, but also provided a kind of evidence that this act did actually exist.

¹⁸ See Ješa Denegri, *Slike-objekti Dušana Otaševića, in Šezdesete: Teme srpske umetnosti*, Svetovi, Novi Sad 1995, pp. 149-157.

¹⁹ See Dušan Otašević (exh. catalogue), *Kolarčev narodni univerzitet, Beograd 1967*. (With the introductory text by Ješa Denegri.)