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Art in A Closed Society

[3.420 words, 1996]

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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.

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 them proposed further readings**, on the website of the Institute for Contemporary Art, www.institute.hr.

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

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Introduction

In an interview, the Russian culturologist Mikhail Epstein advances a thesis that postcommunism is the Russian version of postmodernism because, like postmodernist poetics, it opened space for a free play of "signs and reality, signifiers and signified" in which Russian art (and especially soc-art) could perform its ironic deconstruction of communist mythologems¹. The postcommunist "zero degree of being" mentioned by Epstein implies the creation of an ideological and semiological vacuum that will enable an impartial, deconstructivist reinscription of the demolished communist ideology or, in other words, socialist realism as its representational form. Today, no artistic discourse can remain hermetically sealed within its nominalist confines just because the effects of the aesthetic sign both in the West and the East are determined, more than ever before, by a socio-cultural context and its mechanisms for the production, circulation and consumption of signs. Therefore, if contemporary art operates as a sign coded by the system of culture, this means that the aesthetic effect of the work correlates with the economy of its behaviour as a sign in that same system of culture. In this sense, Arthur Danto advances a thesis that a natural context of the work is no longer a physical (and ideological) space of the gallery; instead, those are the street and mass media, which means that the object and the context produce jointly something that is now called a work of art.

In an essay, A.B. Oliva points out that a difference between postmodernism and postcommunism lies in the fact that the first "does not require distancing from the codes used, from the objects of consumption rescued from the productive channels", while the second, "given the novelty of change, still requires the use of disparity", distance and "irony

¹ See: Ellen E. Berry, Kent Johns, Anesa Miller-Pogačar, *Postcommunist Postmodernism - An Interview with Mikhail Epstein*, 1993.

capable of producing critical consciousness".² In the postmodern, consumer society, we are faced with the "political economy of the sign" (J. Baudrillard) which abolishes the referential function of the sign (on which both the classical economy of the sign and modernist, Greenbergian aesthetics are based) for the sake of structural games of values, by means of which the sign emancipates itself as an autonomous value, as a commodity that is exchanged with itself, with no regard to reality. Postmodernism considers the work of art as a constituent part of a changeable constellation of social and cultural codes which means that, by adopting linguistic tools from everyday life (the objects of consumer culture, the world of media and advertising), the work of art is constituted semiotically by interaction of heterogeneous systems or codes. What is a commodity in the West, says Oliva, is the "used and reconverted ideology" in the East³, which is manipulated as a sign which, liberated from its ideological function, is susceptible to various structural and combinatory games.

Nowhere Land

Whereas communism in the countries of Eastern Europe, as observed by Baudrillard, deimmunised itself and fell into its own emptiness spontaneously and unexpectedly, "as a result of its own inertia", nobody knows what actually happened with communism in former Yugoslavia, since there was no radical ideological demobilization in the country and it plunged into political and ethnic conflicts, resulting in its bloody disintegration⁴. In both former and present-day Yugoslavia, there was no ideological vacuum or necessary objective distance so that Titoist ideology could become the subject matter of an impartial deconstructivist activity⁵. When the actor imitating Josip Broz in Želimir Žilnik's film *Tito for the Second Time Among the Serbs* appears on the streets of Belgrade wearing the marshal's uniform, we realize by the reaction of the people he is talking to that Titoism has not yet been politically or emotionally worn out to such an extent as not to participate in the structuring of Yugoslav reality any longer. As far as the F.R. of Yugoslavia is concerned, one cannot speak here about a simple, chameleonic transformation of communist to nationalist populism, about the substitution of a communist Master by a nationalist one (as held by most analysts). Rather, it is the

² Achille Bonito Oliva, "Neo-Europe (East)", *Flash Art* No. 140, 1988, pp. 61-64. Oliva actually speaks about two kinds of postmodernism - postmodernism of late capitalism and postcommunist postmodernism.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Žan Bodrijar, *Iluzija kraja ili štrajk događaja*, Rad, Belgrade, 1995, p. 42.

⁵ The only artistic deconstruction of Titoist ideology in ex-Yugoslavia during the 1980s took place in Slovenia, through the work of the Neue Slowenische Kunst.

question of a much more complex situation, an ideological confusion, and an ideological and semantic surplus leading to the heightening of social tensions and upheavals. By a cynical and carnivallike confrontation of the Nazi symbol, a Titoist pioneer song and a pathetic phrase of the Serbian nationalists, Raša Todosijević's installation entitled *Gott liebt die Serben* (1993) not only reveals the mentioned "surplus ideology" but also shows that this surplus is nothing else but a resultant of the concealed affinities of totalitarian consciousness.

If postcommunism cannot be a social context of Yugoslav art in the early 1990s, the same holds true for postmodernism, understood in the sense of Jameson's definition of postmodernism as "cultural logic of late capitalism". In the F.R. of Yugoslavia, there was no necessary economic transition aimed at adjusting the communist forms of production and ownership to the dominant model of a liberal economy of late capitalism. In this sense, the consumer, information society fetishizing signs and codes also never took root on Yugoslav soil although many of the essential elements of postmodernism, in terms of artistic language and behavior, found their place in the poetics of Yugoslav artists during the past decade. One also cannot speak about Yugoslavia in terms of Fukuyama's "end of history" announcing the collapse of communism in Europe, or in terms of Gehlen's "posthistory" anticipating a new form of secularized progress brought by global networking technologies. With the imposition of the severe UN sanctions and total international isolation (1992-1995)⁶, Yugoslavia was excluded from all global realignments and all features of universal history, as a closed society in which "some other history" is written.

The Breaking of Signs

During the period of sanctions, Yugoslavia was faced with something that the economist Mladjan Dinkić termed the "economy of destruction" (hyperinflation, a decline in production, black-marketeering, gray economy, unemployment) which entailed the destruction of both a referential and structural value of the sign. The issuing of the bank note with eleven zeroes points to a paradox of the monetary sign which is not such any more, since the addition of zeroes at the time when prices go up even a few times a day entails the subtraction of the same value, if not more, from the

⁶ Following the UN Security Council Resolution 757 (30. May 1996), economic sanctions were imposed on FR Yugoslavia due to its involvement in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The sanctions introduced full economic isolation as well as the rupture of all scientific, cultural and sport connections. Following the peace agreement in Dayton on November 21, 1996, the process of easing and gradual lifting of the sanctions has begun.

value of the bank note. Whereas the withdrawal of money in favour of credit cards in the West is consistent with the disappearance of material signifiers in general, in the Yugoslav hyperinflation this was caused by surplus material signifiers without signified, without value - the more money is issued, the less it is worth, the less it is a sign. Money functions as a "schizophrenic reality" (Deleuze and Guattari), as a sign without a code, a non-sign, the nominal value of which only conceals its factual worthlessness and disappearance.

Money is not only a "commodity among the commodities", as already stated by Marx, but also a representational form of the "genus" of all commodities. It is only through money, its unique position and signifying power that all other commodities become commodities. With the disappearance of money, therefore, we are faced with a general crisis of signification, with a set of floating signifiers devoid of a referential content. And just these floating signifiers, which keep changing their positions, thus forming new chains of signifiers, become essential elements in the program of fetishizing the nation that also turns into a "Thing" (Žižek), into a value being that is greater than itself, into a commodity that is susceptible to combinatory and structural games of values in a struggle for political supremacy. New hermeneutics of the national reaches its delirious climax in a ruthless manipulation with national symbols, whose excessive political instrumentalization annihilates their original, traditional meaning and function. They also become non-signs, sign-phantoms, resembling the Tombs of the Unknown Soldier which are, as claimed by the sociologist Benedikt Anderson, "deliberately empty tombs" permeated with the ghosts of nationalist fantasies⁷. The only difference between the devaluation of the monetary sign and that of the national symbol lies in the fact that the former cannot conceal its schizophrenic nature, while the latter succeeds in it by placing itself in the service of imaginary constructions which preserve the integrity of the symbol only manifestly (nation is an "imaginary community", says Anderson). By entering an imaginary community, the subject is also ensnared in the web of the powerful code that controls both subjects and objects, subordinating both of them to it and exposing them to a political manipulation.

When hegemonistic social discourses, such as economic and national ones, turn into the generators of destructive processes in a society, it becomes clear that during the period of sanctions the Yugoslav society passed through a dramatic period of the entropy of all values, leading to an

⁷ Benedikt Anderson, *Nacija: zamišljena zajednica. Razmatranja o porijeklu i širenju nacionalizma*, Školska knjiga, Zagreb, 1990.

increasing repression by the government apparatus, poverty and social disparity, high crime rate, corruption, primitive nationalism, political clashes and the like.

The Energy of Catastrophe

In this sense, it can be said that during the period of sanctions the Yugoslav society was characterized by something that Peter Sloterdijk termed a "catastrophilic complex" in order to define a "collective disturbance of vitality through which the energies of the vital are shifting to sympathy with the catastrophilic, apocalyptic and violently spectacular", the symptom of which is the "aggravation of social climate that is being filled with schizoid tensions and ambivalences to the point of unbearableness"⁸. The media terror, coupled with the vicinity, density and obscenity of the events (the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina was waged only about one hundred kilometres far from Belgrade) lead to a total collapse of the concept of reality, so that the subject, like Deleuze's and Guattari's schizophrenic, releases some kind of raw material that is susceptible to various attachments, registrations and manipulations. When considering "psychopolitics of a schizoid society", Sloterdijk draws a conclusion that the subject has a choice between two possibilities - embodiment or splitting, withdrawing or participation⁹. Embodiment, by which Sloterdijk understands physical and spiritual escapism of certain groups living in a different "inner realm", is the only possible choice of Yugoslav artists under conditions of external sanctions (which have almost completely stopped cultural exchanges with the world) and internal catastrophic processes. Commenting on the Borislav Pekić's book *The Years Eaten by Locusts* in an essay, Jovan Čekić points out that this prominent Serbian writer realized that this energy of catastrophe can be used to "ensure one's own survival and production but only if one stays on the margins of great historic movements"¹⁰. In a society governed by schizophrenia of broken and separated signs, that is, by a schizophrenic disjunction of reality and the representation of reality, art is the only alternative that can show the way in which value can be returned to individual experience. In their *Manifest on Autonomism*, therefore, the painters Uroš Đurić and Stevan Markuš emphasize that subversion is the "ability not to engage oneself in a big process of development and

⁸ Peter Sloterdijk, *Kritika ciničkoga uma*, Globus, Zagreb, 1992, pp. 127-130.

⁹ Ibid. Sloterdijk actually discusses the situation in Germany in the 1920s, which in many aspects resembles the state of mind in Yugoslavia during the period of sanctions (hyperinflation, unemployment, political clashes, and depression).

¹⁰ Jovan Čekić, "A New Loneliness", *The Belgrade Circle*, 1994, pp. 168-169.

contribution to general progress based on the marginalization of human values and seemingly clear aims"¹¹.

The Empire of Signs

When speaking about the alternative character of artistic production in Yugoslavia, the term "alternative" is not used in linguistic or political sense, as it usually is. Instead, it refers to the establishment of new cultural and institutional context, to the development of alternative networks of artistic communication and practice.¹² But, it turned out that this structure also opposed official cultural policy which, burdened by nationalistic cultural programming and bureaucratic inertia, left both the established Yugoslav artists as well as the young ones without institutional support opting instead for certain forms of retrograde figurative painting proclaimed by nationalist intellectuals as "authentic Serbian contemporary art" as opposed to "imported, Western-influenced" installation and object art.

The escapist and partisan nature of activities suggests that what we have here is an artistic community rather than a scene, since the scene is constituted through the art system and its institutions of representation and critical evaluation, while the community is a kind of forced and loose association aimed at ensuring one's survival. Having lost a link to the European art system as well as the support of government institutions, the Yugoslav artistic community shows the signs of the "Robinsonian syndrome" of loneliness and isolation which, as an essential condition of survival, calls for the establishment of a new context in the form of the mentioned alternative structures¹³. On the other hand, one cannot claim

¹¹ Uroš Đurić and Stevan Markuš, *Manifest on Autonomism*, Radio B92, Belgrade, 1994.

¹² When speaking about alternative networks of communications and activities, we bear specifically in mind the projects of the independent Radio B92, the Fund for an Open Society and the Center for Contemporary Arts, as well as the Center for Cultural Decontamination in Belgrade, Golden Eye Center for Visual Culture in Novi Sad, Aurora Artistic Workshop in Vršac, some private galleries, in addition to the activities of artistic groups (FIA, Škart, Led Art) and associations (Apsolutno), magazines (New Moment, Projeka@t, Kvadart, N'art), numerous individual initiatives and the like. It should also be noted that despite difficulty some cultural institutions have continued to support the scene (Galleries of the Students' Cultural Center and Youth House in Belgrade and especially the Contemporary Fine Arts Gallery in Novi Sad and the National Museum of Montenegro in Cetinje).

¹³ The situation was probably best explained by Belgrade's artist Dejan Anđelković: "The nineties were the years of skepticism and cynicism due to a bloody collapse of the universe in which we lived, due to thoughtless, radical strategies paid with the lives of hundreds of people, due to unscrupulousness of one right more, the right to nation. It is no longer possible to emit some other energy so directly. Contexts were disintegrated together with institutions. It is necessary to redefine one's platform of expression, to develop one's network, to assume and define one's position in this world. There is an increasing number of artists who realize that it is difficult to function without money and a good network which follows the art scene. On the other hand, there is an active awareness that there is no other space or time and that one should work here and now. Some kind of private fanaticism, concentration on this minor event here

that this art community has been shut to a ghetto, because it gathered wide audience and became a basis for the reestablishment of broken cultural ties with abroad after sanctions were lifted in Autumn 1995.

In the case of Yugoslavia, therefore, one cannot speak about the context as an integral component of the work, as is the case with Europe and America, which means that the artist, as the producer of meaning, stands against the society of sign destruction with which he has nothing to exchange. Having realized that in Yugoslavia "only destructive projects can be implemented", Belgrade's artist Saša Marković pointed symbolically to this discrepancy between the discourse of art and that of society by burning the mask-signs (1995) by means of which he commented on social reality and fiction over the past years.

This radical concept of differentiation, introduced by art in relation to society, is reflected in the fact that it operates the signs and codes of a high semantic tension. If we accept the thesis of the French critic Nicolas Bourriaud that contemporary art is increasingly less insisting on expressive values of the sign (which is an achievement of modernism) and increasingly more on its "objective", systemic values (which is an achievement of postmodernism), it can be concluded that the major exponents of Yugoslav art also give preference to the second, relational approach¹⁴. It is the question of floating and movable discourses, devoid of a strict referential framework, which create their semantic universe by inscribing various visual and cultural codes and which are characterized by frequent changes of strategy and media of work, accompanied by the necessary adjustment to nonregular and meager exhibiting, material and financial conditions. Therefore, it should be emphasized that this discursive and semantic nomadism is not only the reflection of the general state of art in the world, but, to a degree, it is also imposed by specific circumstances in which Yugoslav artists work¹⁵.

The Economy of Desire

and now. Only dogged persistence and great energy are moving things slowly. Small moves can also give great pleasure and that's something, isn't it?" See: Zoran Božović, *Likovna umetnost osamdesetih i devedesetih u Beogradu - Razgovori*, Belgrade, 1995, pp. 16-17.

¹⁴ Nicolas Bourriaud, "Producing a Relation with the World", *Aperto '93*, Giancarlo Politi Editore, Milan, 1993, pp. 35-41.

¹⁵ Arthur C. Danto, "Art After the End of Art", *Artforum*, April, 1993, pp. 62-69. Danto advances a thesis that the seventies marked the first full decade of posthistorical art, featured by the acts of dematerialization of the object of art which means, as he emphasized, that it is no longer necessary to follow the "material truth of art".

In such circumstances, art cannot be the mirror or corrective of reality but solely the signal of some other, parallel reality originating in permanent tensions between harsh living conditions and individual fantasy. As explained by Slavoj Žižek, the dignity of fantasy lies in its true "illusionary, fragile, helpless" character and, as such, it strengthens the subject's (or artist's in this case) "impossible relation to the world"¹⁶. According to Žižek, the fundamental psychoanalytical point is that fantasy is a scenario which satisfies the subject's desire, gives it coordinates and specifies its object, while at the same time locating the position occupied by the subject in it¹⁷. In contrast to a collective division of illusion resulting in the loss of the ego in tribalistic (ethnic and ideological) identifications, fantasy is always particular and absolute in its particularity, which means that it resists mediation and that it cannot be made part of some greater symbolic universe.

What we have here is not a conflict between the desire principle and the reality principle which would restrain the artist, forcing him into self-denial or compromising, but an "active synthesis" (Deleuze) which is finding such fluxes of energy in reality as can be used for the achievement of one's own aims. The work of Dobrivoje Krgović and Zoran Naskovski, *Dead-Crossing* (1995) depicts the functioning of the economy of desire in practice. By intervention of a new signifier - a female figure with a whip - Mondrian's painting exhibited in the National Museum in Belgrade is moved to some other scene and put into some other semantic structure, thus subjecting the elements of modernist discursiveness to some kind of fetishist inversion. This incident in the museum order shows that an "active synthesis" is possible only in case of incident, borderline situations and relinking which requires some equilibristic skill. It is just that skill at using the "seismic and fractal" (J. Baudrillard) energy of catastrophe or, in other words, the skill at surviving which is shared by the artist with all other socially fragmented subjects.

¹⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry. An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1983, p. 6.

¹⁷ "It is only through fantasy that the subject is constituted as desiring: *through fantasy we learn how to desire.*" Ibid.