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Freedom, brother, is an approximate
thing

[Essay for the catalogue of the exhibition "Secession. 100 Years of Artistic
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translation from Bulgarian - Luchezar Boyadjiev]

[3.089 words]

Bulgaria



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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.

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Angel Djendema, underground poet

The current Eastern European mind reads a very meaningful metaphor in the title of this exhibition - "A Century of Artistic Freedom. 100 Years Viennese Secession". The count-down of artistic freedom is triggered by and related to the abrupt secession of a group of artists from the whole artistic community at the end of the last century. At the end of our century a lot of artistic groups yearn for entering into and engagement with the big community provisionally called "international artworld". And this is only a segment from the common dream of entire societies and countries to enter at any cost the huge, always already ordered, "international community". It would appear that the belief in integration, in the availability of common interests and a dialogue conducted in a common language, have come along to substitute for the Great Utopias of all kinds that did not justify themselves. The issue of Great Utopias and Freedom is currently relevant even when looking into only one segment of the equation - what does the sub-type "artistic freedom" look like in the situation of transition from the Utopia, known as reality, to the outside (international) model, perceived as Utopia?

Freedom #1

1990 in Bulgaria was the year of the sociological surveys. The belief was that statistics is a higher form of democracy. The calculation of mass attitudes and concepts, as well as, the averaging of desire based on mathematics was there to replace the ideological injustice. In its struggle for survival, the official Union of Bulgarian Artists conducted a similar survey. However, the results disturbed even its most ardent functionaries.

For it turned out that the mass of Bulgarian artists was "singing" praise to the recently discarded system of state instigated restrictions, to all these juries and boards appointed by the state in order to evaluate, correct, approve and give permission to the work of the artist. The main motivation being that there should be somebody - an institution, responsible individuals, to determine what's good in art. Practically not one of the surveyed artists admitted to having experienced the feeling of lack of freedom in his/her professional activities. Most artists were even stressing that they have felt absolutely free in their choice of subject matter, visual language, form, etc., as well as, when exhibiting their works. Artists appeared to have been satisfied with their education as well and also with the chances to show their works outside of the country, whenever they themselves would feel "confident enough to do so". When voiced objections were made to some concrete individuals or single artists that have been employed by the state while exercising "wrong" influence on the cultural policies. The very positive distinction was made between the Soviet Union or Poland where in the recent past artists had been subjected to repression for the nature of their works, whereas during the totalitarian period in Bulgaria anybody taking a degree in artistic education was awarded certain freedoms and privileges. For instance, artists were allowed to have beards and not be "enslaved" with an official employ. The first was an external symbol of freedom for the creative individuality while the second confirmed the illusion of lack of control on creativity. As a whole the artists' community in Bulgaria turned out to have been the most satisfied segment of society. The lack of an actual audience for art was a minor matter. According to the Bulgarian artists the public was hardly to be seen as a connoisseur and consumer of art, its taste was seen as far too underdeveloped for independent appreciation which was, of course, explained with mistakes made by the state educational programs. There followed more comparisons with Russia where "people appreciate their culture by tradition" or with the West where the free market functions as a coordinate system for evaluation. With the collapse of the state as an ideal public/connoisseur/consumer the artists began to be afraid that they will not be understood and will be left unappreciated.

Freedom #2

It is exactly at this time that the mythology of the market freedom was being formulated - the recognition of the artist depends on it, just like the social and economic prosperity of the state depends on its existence (or as in our case - the lack of it...). In our naive post-socialist consciousness "market" and money were not linked inseparably. Confused by unclear social

theories that were justifying personal but not private property, we couldn't imagine very rich artists, only very famous (= good) artists. "The market" was expected as a new theoretical value system, as a democratic patron who will only readjust the hierarchies but will not affect life itself. The market, in the view of the artists, was supposed to put the dot on top of the "i" (capital) pushing to the foreground the good artists while eliminating the bad ones. The market was the big hope mainly for the younger generation that did not fall into the traditional concepts for creativity. Repeating the mistakes of the Russian post-revolution avant-garde artists, this generation hoped for the direct recognition by the people, this time based on market values. In their struggles both the aesthetical conservatives and the aesthetical liberals were calling upon the future art market in the same way the Ancient Heroes summon the Gods. Just like many other economical euphoria on the way to capitalism, this one disappeared quite soon. The cherished justice of the market did not take place and for everybody's amazement the rich artists began to be considered good artists...The echo of this situation has not subsided even now. The last hope of the artist is that due to the economic crisis money is not in the hands of the "right" potential buyers and collectors.

Freedom #3

It would appear that the Secession is the first multinational group of artists although its members are citizens of one and the same state. All of them together strive to formulate the modern language of Austrian art while using their individual and national specifics. In the texts of the group the enlightened faith in man together with the romantic hope for change are clearly perceptible. The world, which at this is Eurocentric and observable, seems to have been able to react to aesthetical ideas. The artists readily take the responsibility for those. Their demiurgical activity is demonstrated in the Gesamtkunstwerk, in the total modernistic project which while not changing the whole world immediately, at least offers examples for this possibility. One hundred years later the economic globalization turned the various margins of the world into a bunch of interdependent elements while the new communication media support the feeling of interlinkage. However, in spite of the claims made by the politicians, disintegration is taking over. There is the significant example of the European people that are additionally separated into those who do not have borders and those for whom geography consists only of borders... The quantity of states in Europe increased by 30% and Bulgaria, for example, was transferred from the group of small European countries into the group of the "medium" sized - the ones that are smaller are much more now... Freedom goes hand in

hand with equality and the equality principles have changed everything now - from the draft for the World Soccer Championships to the Biennials of Contemporary Art. On the other side, the former totalitarian states faced the problem (the realization) that political democracy is not the only precondition for world equality and are currently taking exams in other fields.

Art is now free in form almost everywhere, but it turns out to be enslaved by its own responsibility to prove that it is relevant in the "bigger picture" context and not only in its national or exotic being. The possibility to freely move around the artist' body could be proven but it is a lot more difficult to prove inner freedom. One of the brightest illusions that art can change the world is no longer operational. The total artistic projects even if they are originating today, as for example in Russia, are pressed to speak the current lingua franca - the language of politics. In Moscow Oleg Kulik wishes to represent at parliamentary elections the party of the animals - a minority among all others. Also, there Anatoli Osmolovskii is organizing a sign-up petition against the representative political elections in general in order to prove their meaninglessness.

The current longing for the Gesamtkunstwerk is manifested in the creation of new mythologies and large-scale fictional situations in narrative installations, pseudo-documentary photographic works and virtual reality projects.

Freedom #4

The artists of the Secession are featured in the history of art as the creators of the last big style in European art, of its last Golden Age. They accept with optimism the achievements of science and technology as a logical result of the human effort to make the world a better place. They try to "touch" even the tiniest object with their magic stick in order to transform it into an "artwork". Only a decade and a half later there is the outburst of industrial design and artists care now not so much for the object itself, as for its mass productivity and function.

At the end of our century it would appear that the signification "an artist" is reserved only for the creator of unique works meant for exhibitions. For all other activities requiring creative energy and proper education there have been invented additional clarifications. The graphic designer, the fashion designer, the media designer, the video artist, etc. are engaged with specific segments of our environment. The educational institutions in various countries have two concepts for the artistic profession - a synthetic "fine" arts education and a narrowly defined "applied" professionalization. Between these two poles there is the survival of the artist as a specie. Most

artists start their careers as "Sunday artists" of fine art, much like the Sunday car drivers, while making a living for the rest of the week. Artistic occupations are also available in some cases, but the rule is the non-artistic employment. The definition "free artist" now practically means a big career step forward and at least some form of market success. For all the rest - there is the system of national and international stipends, fellowships and prizes to take care of them. In most cases these have age limits. So, what happens to the not so young and not so successful? This is a 1970ies type of question also much in the style of the Guerrilla Girls and there is no easy answer to it either. The thought that the "international art community" is a type of a social project that is channeling and "aestheticizing" social tensions is very attractive... The freedom to be an artist is still there but within the framework of some strictly defined rules, even laws.

Freedom #5

The symbol of the Secession is its building in the center of Vienna, crowned with an intricate golden lace sphere and possessing one of the most perfect spatial "emptiness" meant to be filled up by art. The interesting fact is that already in the first decade of its functioning this exhibition space is deserted by part of the Secession founding members. They are still "Secession" although they don't use the name formally and prefer to exhibit their works elsewhere. It seems that the problem with the artist' identity which is always already there and is expecting him/her in the seemingly empty space (a concept of Yuri Leiderman) was well known even a century ago. Indeed, sometimes it looks like the art shows could consist of the names of the artists only - behind each name there is a certain world outlook and ways of its expression, isn't it so? Artists are invited to new shows with new works but... because of their old works. It is hard to imagine existence without or outside identity but how free could possibly be a situation where identity is a medium, a professional tool? The ideal for the White Cube of the exhibition space with its programmed amnesia have been subjected to revision many times. There have been art shows in private houses, offices, hotel rooms, abandoned factories, garages, on the streets, in the desert, in sea spaces, forests and uninhabited salt lakes. But each time the artist goes back to the White Cube where the lack of an imminent memory for the physical presence of art is successfully compensated for by the myth-generating collective memory. As opposed to the natural or the urban environment that do not keep a human memory unless man enters into a serious conflict with them. Art needs a public and on its turn the public accepts art as part of civilization, isn't it so? The viewer, professional or so to say "regular", is currently "voting" for a more

comfortable consumption of art within the framework of a gallery White Cube or of a decorated museum parallelepiped.

Freedom #6

In 1903, at only the 16th exhibition in the Secession building, the show had been devoted to the historical evaluation of the artistic process and the historical context. The members of the group presented their works there together with those of some distant or close in time predecessors. Still earlier presentations had been organized outside of the native geographical context of the group, for instance at the Paris World Fair.

The attitude towards time is defined as *Ver Sacrum*, a Holly Spring - a full of suggestions metaphor for the beginning. Currently the relation of art to both history and geography is not being questioned. Both are often used as a background material for the artists' ideas. Travel through history could be individual or group while always reflecting on reflections on knowledge (after Lyotard). Contemporary art often looks like a retelling/remembering of things that have happened even before it starts on the new narrative about the new happenings.

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Getting to know and "using" geography can also depend on personal interests but as a whole it is better organized and usually reflects the political situation quite directly. In the last years the international artistic community "migrates" away from its traditional centers towards more or less exotic fields that have just "entered" the coordinate systems of civilization. The temporary migrations triggered by the international biennials for instance, look at the same time as exploratory expeditions with a touch of safari and camping out for amusement. The instruments and utensils for investigation and classification of the unknown are being brought along from the civilization centers like New York, London, Paris, Berlin, Vienna. The return trip takes back samples ("trophies" doesn't seem like the right word) from foreign cultures, their languages, attitudes and concepts. 1997, the year of the Secession anniversary, was for the international art community something like a trip around the world - from Venice, Kassel and Munster, through Istanbul and Lyons on the way to Johannesburg and Kwangju, via Sidney... The artists and the other members of the artworld travel so much that our practical world should arrange in all types of passenger carriers an art-travel-class, similar but not quite as fancy as the business class. Freedom of movement is an important kind of freedom that is recognized by our time as a value in itself which needs some proper arrangements.

Freedom #7

Who was in charge of what was to be shown in the Secession exhibitions? Probably the artists themselves. And the artists themselves were working on the installation aspects thus creating a visual context for their works as well. Precisely in order to feel their freedom completely the Secession artists separated themselves from the conservative institution, the "Society of Artists". And became themselves an institution almost immediately. They made another attempt for liberation in 1905. And once more became an institution whose name features the name of the leader of the group - "The Klimt Group/Art Shows". Some time back, somebody declared, for the N-th time, that art has died and only the artists have remained. Even if so, the artists are not alone. There are the curators and the critics, the exhibitors and the dealers, the politicians and the managers - all powerful institutions. They have gathered together their status and strength in order to support creative freedom, to be its mediator with society, to protect it from the accidental or purposeful societal vandalism. Each of the relevant institutions collects and reflects the freedom of art as a giant reflector but absorbs part of it as well. May be the freedom of art today is an unsaturated solution, its concentration depending on the strategies of the institutions? Is the freedom of the institutions possible? And who then is to record its existence? May be freedom is an institution within the network of other institutions? Is symbiosis a freedom? Is the artist today a subject or a predicate of freedom? May be art with its immanently attributed freedom is not dying at all but is becoming invisible for the surveillance devices of the institutions? Then they will have to correct their optics.

Freedom #8

One hundred years ago art was involved with Man as an indivisible whole with its Bios, Eros and Tanatos. Its form is a statement or a revelation and its embodiment - an artwork. Art enjoys the freedom to speak a language that is not the language of life and has its own audience as well. Although already willing to become co-author (after Walter Benjamin) the audience is still a viewer/reader.

Current art is also involved with Man but accept the human being as a single factor of difference whose specifics are subject to clarification. The form of art has been transformed into a process and its embodiment - into communication. Contemporary art has the freedom to speak the language of life while interpretation is expected from the viewer. At the end the viewer becomes a co-author (the viewer is a participant in the communication

process, isn't he/she?). If we were to say that art is disappearing, and the artist is dissolving into the viewer then the contemporary art scene looks much like the "cosmic bouillon" that is bound to give birth to entirely unfamiliar phenomena.

Freedom #9, 10

"Die Zeit ihre Kunst. Der Kunst ihre Freiheit". I hope this could be translated in an adequate way into all world languages.