

**Janka Vukmir**

## The Reflection of the City

[Translated by Nicole Hewitt]

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This text was archived at the Institute for Contemporary Art in Zagreb collection, as part of the **Research project** conceived in 1997 by a SCCAN – Soros Centers for Contemporary Art Network, funded by the Open Society Foundation, New York.

The purpose of the project was to select, collect and disseminate texts on contemporary art practices in the Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, around Soros Centers for Contemporary Art, written in and about art of the 1990s. The coordination of the project was carried out by Janka Vukmir, SCCA – Zagreb, today the Institute for Contemporary Art, Zagreb.

We did not intervene in any of texts more than just correcting obvious typos and spelling. On the occasion of collecting texts, we were given permission from all authors, to rightfully use them. If anyone now has different instructions, please, contact us at the [info@institute.hr](mailto: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](http://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.

Janka Vukmir

## The Reflection of the City

Seeing that, according to my information, as I write this text I am the only symposium participant on the inside of the exhibition and symposium ISLAND, as far as its organisation and preparation is concerned, I do not intend to interpret the theme of ISLAND, but to use a single art work to identify the source of the concept. However in order to reach this work I will need to ask for your patience and attention, for this work also is an island, but so enveloped in contexts, that one has to reach it the roundabout way. I apologise for repeating certain parts of my text Flight or Navigation written for the ISLAND exhibition catalogue, but this, unfortunately, could not be avoided. An island attracts attention to its appearance primarily through its isolation. It is always depicted as an area either seriously better or seriously worse than the dominant continental area, but whatever the case may be, it is always exclusive. This idea depends on mutual communication, a problem only recently, in historical terms, solved by means of telecommunication, but otherwise and primarily solved - by flight or navigation.<sup>1</sup>

In the winter of 1992 when I was preparing an exhibition of contemporary Croatian art The Vienna Landing, the artists attending the opening had to travel to Vienna in the only possible way at that time - by boat. The exhibition title itself indicated that Vienna could only be reached by air or by sea. The point of embarkation was Split, at the time a real island, unreachable even by means of modern telecommunication.

At the same time, Dubrovnik, too, was completely isolated, having just broken the siege of the city.

I came to Dubrovnik in the summer of 1994 with a small exhibition called Quinta Essentia, whose total weight was below the allowed flight baggage limit, and with two of the four artists featured in the show. Just as we were leaving a man stopped me in the street and thanked me for, not only putting

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<sup>1</sup> See: J.V. Flight or Navigation in the ISLAND exhibition catalogue

Dubrovnik on the exhibition itinerary, but for the three of us accompanying the exhibition to the City of Dubrovnik, thus qualifying the event as a magnanimous act, a patriotic gesture, an achievement bordering on the adventurous.

I remember this encounter well, both because I found it flattering and because it made me feel isolated from Dubrovnik, from its inside, and I began to see the continent I live in as simply a little bigger, but still, an island.

Both these events would not have occurred had there not been a need for communication befitting the given time. We would not have disembarked in Vienna, nor would the exhibition *Quinta Essentia* have travelled to Dubrovnik, nor would we be opening the exhibition *ISLAND* tomorrow. For, the communication between individual and community is, in fact, the primary principal of art, and a radical one, as art is a radical form of communication, and not a dialogue with, or protest against, tradition and the past.

Slaven Tolj, The Art Workshop Lazareti and the club *Island* are a treasure island to our modern communication, which prompted us all, in our desire for communication, to come here. But there would also have been no *ISLAND* without Slaven Tolj's visual art work. The concept of this exhibition stems from his obsessive interest in-, and the total immersion of his work in, - the specificity of the Dubrovnik situation, so without knowing his work, we will not be able to understand the actual context the exhibition concept derives from. And as Slaven has, this time, restrained from showing his own work, unless he could not resist the temptation and has changed his mind in the meantime, I would like to refer to some of his earlier works in order to direct your attention to the elements which played an important role in the conception of *ISLAND*.

I must emphasise that all Slaven's works is made of materials from Dubrovnik, whether the work be physically and materially executed or just a mental image. As I have decided to concentrate only on those works and performances produced in Dubrovnik, and not on the works which changed locations and were shown outside of Dubrovnik, I will have to, unfortunately, omit the work *Una Bella Favola*<sup>2</sup> from last year's *Soros Centre For Contemporary Arts, Zagreb* exhibition, *Checkpoint*. I will just mention, out of interest, that it consists of old blinds from Dubrovnik which, within their context, functioned both as a metaphor for space, a landscape - of both sky and sea, and an independent image of the line that divides them. On the line between sea and sky only an island stands, leaving its imprint

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<sup>2</sup> For an interpretation of the work *Una Bella Favola* and a brief description of the characteristics of Dubrovnik I think are relevant to Slaven's work and are not mentioned in this context, see my text *Interstice* in the catalogue of the exhibition *Checkpoint*.

on both one and the other.

To continue in this vein, I will mention the performance *Ascent* from 1989, performed with Marija Grazio in the most heavily guarded entrance to the city Lučica Pile, which also deals with isolation and materialises the same line dividing the sea and the sky. This is a performance of contradiction, for, in fact, nothing is actually performed. The presence of Slaven and Marija forms the time frame of the performance, and their relationship becomes defined during the performance, but it does not constitute it. The performance has elements of process-based work, contained in tracing the line dividing the sea from the sky. A special element was introduced into the work, which makes it easier for us to follow the direction of the line, a wooden point whose role consists of registering the only sign of the passage of time, and most of our attention is concentrated on it. Slaven and Marija spent five hours on the rocks under the fortress Bokar on the one side, and the fortress Lovrijenac on the other, waiting for the situation to develop and free them from isolation.

Each one of them alone, sitting peacefully on their rock, did not communicate directly in any way. The ebb of the gradually receding tide enabled the two of them, but also the viewers, to concentrate on a common space, because as the level of the sea receded, the vertical lines of the object produced for this occasion began penetrating the surface, and united them in a common, isolated centre of attention and concentration. The mutual isolation of the performers, was undermined by the ever more pronounced isolation (achieved through emphasis) of the object emerging from the sea, and the performance drew to a close as their mental communication became sufficiently reduced, transferring the attention onto the tension created by the emerging object. Apart from this, the title of the performance -*Ascent* - indicated the direction the object was moving in, and at the same time concealed the direction in which the tide was changing the sea level, so it carried within itself a kind of negation achieved through inversion. The only material element in the performance is the phallic looking point, which offers additional connotations to the relationship of the two passive performers. The wooden point itself would have remained unnoticed had the whole environment not been defined by the presence of Slaven and Marija who, having focused their attention on the process the wooden point is subject to, defined the whole event. Let me add that one of the basic laws of natural perception is concealed here<sup>3</sup>, according to which perception does not consist merely of the synthesis of perceiving the unchanging components of an object, but also of our constant communication and life with them. In this way also did the

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<sup>3</sup> See Maurice Merleau Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*.

interchange of high and low tide, a continuous process of change, become materialised only upon achieving a contextualised mental image of them. One of the intentions of the exhibition ISLAND was to establish a dialogue between two islands, so we will find another instance in a different performance where Slaven achieved communication with Marija, between the two different locations they were in and with the help of non-material means.

This occurred in the performance Tal from 1990, in Dubrovnik, which took place in the City Bell Tower and the Sponza palace. The performance lasted twelve hours, from midnight to midday, which Slaven spends in a bell tower 31 meters high, under a bell among the "greenies"<sup>4</sup>, Dubrovnik's symbol of the passage of time. Squatting under the renaissance bell as the bell tolled on the hour, every hour, he would change his position for 180°, turning alternately towards the sea and towards the City.

At the same time, Marija spent twelve hours standing under a niche in the Palace Sponza where the other two "greenies" are kept, after each bell toll, her voice would reveal her presence to Slaven. The dimensions of the space in the bell tower where Slaven was and the niche in front of which Marija stood were identical, thus stressing the balance of isolation and communication. This performance gave the island another sure means of communication, a vocal, invisible and immaterial link.

Tal<sup>5</sup>, the mythological figure, after whom the performance is called, is connected to the island in more than one way. First of all this bronze figure lived in the centre of Crete and guarded the kingdom of the Cretan king Minos. It was his duty to patrol the borders of the kingdom three times a day and to make sure that no one landed on the island, but also that no one left it. One version of the myth claims that he ended up there at Zeus's command, with the assignment of looking after Europa who then gave him to Minos. He is also famous for not allowing the Argonauts to replenish their water supplies when they landed on Crete, which cost him his life.

A later version presents Tal in a different light, as the inventor of the saw, the compass and the potter's wheel. Out of jealousy of his talents his own uncle, Daedalus, the great inventor, hurled him over the top of the Athens acropolis. But as he fell, the goddess Athena turned him into a quail, perdix in Greek, as he is also known, and thus saved his life. The two of them meet

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<sup>4</sup> "greenies" are the two figures in the bell tower striking the hours. Originally wooden, they were replaced by bronze figurines in 1506.

<sup>5</sup> Antun Maračić's interpretation of the performance Tal in the text *The Owl and the City* in the catalogue accompanying Slaven Tolj's one man show *Bubo Bubo Maximus*, held in the Gallery of Art in Dubrovnik in 1995 and at the Zvonimir Gallery in Zagreb compares Tal and the "greenies" in terms of strength, the strength of an inhuman copper giant guarding the territorial integrity of an island and the inhuman strength of the sound which Slaven endured under the bell tolls, in the company of the copper greenies, symbols of time, which kill us with their determination and indifference.

once more, when Daedalus was burying his son Icarus, who, in an attempt to fly from the island Crete, fell into the sea and drowned. This story emphasises the primary characteristics of an island; an island is an isolated centre, it can be reached only by flight or by navigation.

To evade the passage of time under the watchful eye of the mighty greenies' or the possibility of escape under the vigilance of the giant Tal whose life was saved by granting him the ability of flight, are equally impossible solutions, for everyone concerned, therefore Tal and the "greenies" are the same. They guard the territory, they guard the goddess of love, but they also refuse to give any newcomer life saving water. The island's conflicting qualities are equally accentuated; it could be heaven on earth, but it could also be like solitary confinement.

This performance was also achieved through the activity of the artist who defines his work, and in so doing isolates it, through physical presence. It is important to note, however, that, apart from the physical presence, the changes occurring within symbolic coordinates and the vocal communication, there is no other activity and that the elements the artists introduce into the work do not interfere with the urban detail, but give it connotations of a context. The discretion the performance is produced with and which makes it unrepeatable exists on the level of mental perception. And when the twelve-hour running time of the performance runs out, the work still exists. The communication between Sponza and the bell tower, once established via the performance, remains open and living. Today, for each one of us, it exists as something physically present, because we carry it like a mental image. Tal guards it, and time still passes.

The passage of time features in another work by Slaven from 1993 shown at an exhibition, also conceived by Slaven, held in Dubrovnik. The work was called Time and Destiny: Interrupted Games or Pax. Vobis. Memento Mori Qui. Ludetis Pilla. (Peace be with you, Remember you must die. You who play ball here.)

Tennis balls caught in the moulded leaves of a capital, turn out to be, if we note the date of the work, the remains of a child's game cut short by the war, a game which took place in yet another familiar City space, the east wall of the cathedral.

It is exclusively the detection of detail and its mental isolation, achieved by contextualising the concept that forms the basis of this work. The work is not realised in a physical sense, although it has a physical form; and it is not a concept which strives to present an idea of the physical object through perception, on the contrary it works in the opposite direction: it creates imagination from an existing form. Its form is not momentary, it includes time, as does film, which Slaven has interrupted for the viewer - to allow him three contexts of isolation. That which is isolated - from the future

-is the present, arrested - and therefore excessive time. A detail of the whole is isolated, by way of association, sight, perception. The identification of the object and the environment into an image takes place at the point when thought is isolated from reality, when it is - an island.<sup>6</sup>

Our recent history proves the fact that it is physically impossible to reach an island by any other way except by air or sea. In order to reach Dubrovnik during the siege of the city the naval blockades had to be broken by convoys of ships. In order to reach Sarajevo, where Slaven once studied, unscheduled flights were secured, and food packets were air dropped to feed Srebrenica. This radical experience was the source of Slaven's performance from 1993 *Food for Survival*.

The can contains an unidentified powder mix to which water must be added. Slaven and Marija, in order to eat, spread the mixture onto their bodies to feed each other and thus survive. Is it really necessary to list the level of isolation this work implies and the way this isolation can be felt physically.

To conserve, to preserve, are only polite ways of saying excess, time at a standstill. It is an extreme act to make time stop for the sake of unidentified food, to isolate it hermetically in the metal cavity of an object, in a little island, which, if you can swim that far, will save your life.

This time the performers are completely active; whether that is due to the food for survival is difficult to say, but the physical performance residue - the empty can, becomes one of Dubrovnik's commonplace inverted spaces. This performance contains components of a multiple inversion. Slaven's procedure itself is inverted. He does, admittedly, use a found situation, but not one he found, but one that found him, therefore his presence does not mark a found environment, but he uses his activeness to articulate a new environment from the one he came upon. He separates it by choice and defines it through actions.

Although this performance was shown in Helsinki, I decided to include it in this list of works from Dubrovnik because its experience is the result of a radical form of isolation, and its implications are universal. That which is radical in art is a result of the very nature of radicalism, for radicalism aspires towards being thorough and all encompassing, regardless of its sources, and its intention is to assimilate all aspects of life into one initial principal. And is that not the nature of *Food for Survival*?

Radicalism, expressed in a different way, can also, finally, be found in the work I had in fact intended to talk about.

In 1994 Slaven had a one man show called *Bubo-Bubo Maximus* in Dubrovnik and in Zagreb in 1995. As each space had its own requirements

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<sup>6</sup> See text *Flight or Navigation* in the catalogue of the exhibition *ISLAND*, where this work is dealt with at greater length.

which changed some of the connotations of the piece, I will have to leave out the exhibition in Zagreb unfortunately, although I would very much like to point out some of its elements and meanings. Although the work was exhibited in a closed space, the exhibition endowed the gallery with exterior elements, and not just in its social connotations, but also literally. The exhibition owes its title to a kind of owl, an owl that lives in the City, looks after its nocturnal part and whose voice gives it away. Slaven, again, establishes a sonic, or audio-spatial relationship, but this time not on an intimate level, but on a social level, although small scale, in the isolated space of the City. Due to the nature of things the owl is exhibited in a superior position to the habitual and therefore figures as an observer of a subordinate isolated situation. The environment is "decorated" with burst children's balloons, caught on the wires connected to the ornate gallery lamps. A minimal, but central, part, not due to the work's disposition, but to the isolationist accent the object creates, is occupied by a small room with a little fan claustrophobically placed under a glass dome in which the same, stale air circulates persistently.

There is a separate room in the gallery in which the artist displayed a series of polaroid photographs showing the inherited features of selected parents and children from Dubrovnik thus emphasising the typical endogenous island situation, closed absolutely and permanently.<sup>7</sup>

This almost illustrative presentation of the result of Dubrovnik's isolation could be felt even physically, because the subjects of the portraits were present at the opening of the exhibition, so the pairs of faces were duplicated and the room seemed fuller than it actually was.

But Slaven's obsessive preoccupation with the City is not, naturally, one sided. However critical of the social isolation of the City, determined both by circumstance and inherited through tradition, the exhibition may be, it is equally strongly empathic and understanding of the situation. Which is why Slaven literally offers a way out of this claustrophobic environment created in the gallery and in which he once again placed Dubrovnik.

Three large arches, placed in the Art Gallery, openings facing outwards, offer a view of the island Lokrum. This view of Lokrum, this isolated view is also Slaven's work, included in the exhibition on an equal footing and offering a view of the source of the exhibition ISLAND.

The situation in the gallery, the Dubrovnik ambience reconstructed by way of association is one island, and its reflection Lokrum, another - the island in front of the city, uninhabited, part reservation, part isolation. Slaven's approach in constituting this work consists of detecting the compatibility of the mental forms of City and Island, and in his determination not to interfere

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<sup>7</sup> In the Zagreb version of the exhibition the photographs were displayed on wooden boards, which, in Dubrovnik, had served as protection from direct hits, in this manner the exhibition gained an exterior element in the Zvonimir Gallery in Zagreb, which apart from anything else is in a basement.

with their communication, but to set it apart, to emphasise it, to expose it. This work, like the other works described earlier, lends form to imagination not by starting off with an idea and ending with its material manifestation, but by the concept of separation, of conceptualising already existing, isolated and natural forms.

Just as the City and the Island are reflections of each other, so too is the momentary reflection, the view of the Island from an island, a contextualised interspace, a space of presupposed, but absent communication and a key moment of identification, the moment which transforms the subject and its surroundings into an image, the moment in which thought is completely isolated, when thought becomes - an island? We were looking for marginality, but that presupposes knowledge of the centre. Seeing that we were looking for specific or presumed and familiar margins, as the symposium brief states, we must have known where its centres are.

If we try to define just one centre, a centre surrounded by all these margins, it becomes surrounded from all sides and therefore is an island. Existing between sea and sky, imprinted on both of them.

Such is the nature of Slaven Tolj's work, it stems from Dubrovnik, its presence is discreet, but intensely defined - by its contextualisation. In constituting an Island Slaven creates the reflection of the City.