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Some Aspects of Yugoslav Modern
Art: Art or Accident?

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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.

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.

Lidija Merenik

Some Aspects of Yugoslav Modern Art: Art or Accident?

1.

Belgrade Museum of Contemporary Art is, in every sense, paradigmatic for Tito-Yugoslavian policy towards the East and the West, during the 50-s and 60-s. Built at the entrance to New Belgrade at the time of the founding of the Non-aligned countries "movement," isolated like a monument, architecturally in the spirit of the international style, it represents a "link" between the Yugoslav turn from the social-realist, voluntary building of a new world on the swampy soil of the bank of Sava (where New Belgrade was built), to the high modernist make-up of a rising new political course. It is "the missing link" in the future schizoid chain of events and Ersatz ideologies. At the same time, Contemporary Arts Museum could be an example of what Marshall Berman sees as the "civilization's outer shell," an effect of a violent modernization, due to an objective, global underdevelopment of the economic and social system, non-idyllic reality, as well as political, economic, and spiritual pressures.¹ "A modernism of underdevelopment" explains perhaps more effectively that the term like postcommunism, the whole East European scene in the last seventy years. It does not grow, like it does in the West, out of real social or economic conditions, but out of dreams of modernization.² "A modernism of underdevelopment," then, logically, asks a question of the essence of east European postmodernism. Was it just a dream as well? Contemporary Arts Museum is also an example of a dream of modernization, which does not arise because of real economic and social circumstances, but due to "a modernism of underdevelopment." Ironically, the Museum has completely

¹ M. Berman, Petrograd, a Modernism of Underdevelopment, *Marksizam u svetu* Nos. 10-11, pp. 230-342, Beograd, 1986.

² "... a crippled and deformed modernization – is happening in the Third World. A modernism of underdevelopment is doomed to be based on imaginations and dreams of modernity... It throws itself into a frenzy of self-dissatisfaction and survives only through huge stocks of self-irony..." (M. Berman, p. 289.)

shared a destiny of the political structure that created and nourished it. It had moments of great success during Tito's "turn" to the West in late 1960s and 1970s, it had moments of depression and decline during the second half of 1980s, it felt a totalitarian turn in the early 1990s (through a ruthless change of the qualified governing team, and adoption of a completely closed, conservative, politicized exhibition concept).

The animosity towards radical artistic languages on a part of the contemporary Yugoslav critics and establishment, as well as a lack of interest for the continuity of avant-garde artistic activity in this environment, is to a large extent based in the adopted and later perverted so-called (totalitarian) interpretive discourse. This discourse was expressed from the hushed attacks on enformel in the late 1950s and open attacks on the abstraction of 1960s, through a sort of ghettoization of the conceptual art within the Belgrade Student Cultural Center (SKC) after 1968, through restrictive revisions or ignoring of the avant-garde tendencies and championing all forms of populism in the culture, like naive art and folklore, all the way to the emphasizing of national myths (the Battle of Kosovo), and pseudo-religious, commercial new painting. That is why the historical consequences of the fine arts morphology of the socialist realism should be distinguished from much deeper roots of the so-called *modus operandi* in culture, which has its visible continuity until today, now joined with the hard nationalist current. The ignoring or obstructing of the processes of the real rehabilitation of some artistic ideas is already visible from 1950s and the so-called "opening up" of the culture.³ A selection of rehabilitated artistic languages also implied a representational current of the "modern traditionalism," as a language that was on its semantic plane closer and more accessible to the populist reading.

Thus, even after the official break with so-called socialism, a specific state of a cultural amnesia continued, including the establishment of partial criteria, suggesting models of the "acceptable" art, the one that would not significantly disturb a structure of the "society in order," particularly the one that would not tend to cross into a sphere outside art, in the real life. Through this, radical artistic languages were marked as something apart, and, in final consequence, accidental, barely desirable or non-desirable within the official cultural policy. That is why a participation of the "emptied," aestheticized high modernism in the power structures after the war was possible.⁴

³ A good example is Ljubomir Micic's *Zenit*, Serbo-Croat avant-garde of 1920s, at the time firmly connected primarily to the Russian constructivism, rehabilitated only in 1970s.

⁴ In Serb historiography, this phenomenon was called "socialist aestheticism." See S. Lukic, *Socialist Aestheticism, In the Current of the Literary Life*, pp. 67-69, Beograd, 1983.

Activities devoid of ideology and emancipated phenomenon played a role of the “civilization’s outer shell” in the policy of sitting on the fence. Among other things, this was possible because of the lack of a truly avant-garde or neo-avant-garde activity. The only neo-avant-garde of the more recent history, conceptual art after 1968, was not blocked, but remained ghettoized, as mentioned above. Hence, its attack on the institutionalized art and cultural institutions that participated in the division of power, was localized, and, in a way, controlled⁵.

2. 1992 – 1995

In the course of 1970s, during the rise of the Belgrade conceptual art, a radical language of “another line” has been sharpened, in contrast to both the inherited conservatism, as well as to the modernist “civilization’s outer shell.” Its anti-system actions, limited as it were inside the SKC, further intensified para-theses of the established culture on the “avant-garde conspiracy.” However, some artists, like Rasa Todosijevic, continued an assault to the socialist middle (compromising) solutions, that is to say, onto a situation objectively based in the post-war watering down of the radical artistic concepts, whose political equivalent was Yugoslav “sitting on the fence.” During 1980s, a “new wave” generation offered a concept of irony directed against the so-called realist and totalitarian structures of the society: the concept was entertaining, funny, anticipating, but achieved nothing, perhaps because it was soon crushed by the brute force of 1990s. In the first half of 1990s, especially between 1992 and 1995, it is almost as if art took a generally escapist attitude, confronted with problems of the sense of its own activity and survival in impossible conditions. Such escapism can be understood not only as a consequence of shock because of the events resulting in the disintegration of Yugoslavia, but also as a consequence of the attitude that art should not be an arbiter in politics. Taking into account political engagement of a part of the intelligentsia, which programmatically supported surfing of the government on a wave of nationalism, and warring behavior that followed, such escapism was the most honest solution in one

⁵ This problem, rarely discussed by Yugoslav historiography, is at the very foundation of the actual social position of contemporary art.⁵ The state of the contemporary Yugoslav art is similar to the one of seventy years ago, as well as to the one of fifty years ago. It has been permanently described as “pro-Western,” “incomprehensible,” “decadent,” at the height of the chauvinist hysteria of the early 1990s, even “mercenary”: it has been judged and discussed by an inherited interpretative discourse. In other words, art has been pushed to the very margins of a certain social structure and limits of the material existence, forced through it into being “alternative,” expelled from the currents of normal or market integration. Such a situation, creating a state similar to Sloterdijk’s “Weimar syndrome,” was especially prominent during 1990s

moment. First, one should have admitted that s/he hit with the head the wall of History: "My defeat is, actually, an expression of my new understanding, the one telling me that the history is still the main tailor of my destiny, as well as the destiny of all of us, all of which I have persistently refused to accept, until a couple of years ago."⁶

The term "fictional site" is the closest to the possible definition of several, morphologically different artistic trends that have been developed since the late 1970s and early 1980s, assuming their chameleonic character in the early 1990s. To define the dominant characteristic of contemporary art in general and of Yugoslav art in the period 1992-1995 in particular, one can use the same term - "fictional site", which is the most valuable legacy of the 1980s (now reduced and interpreted from the viewpoint of unexpressionism and certain formal purism). This term may also include the notion of active escapism - the creation of a parallel-fictional reality and quite personal stories which actually would not have emerged if they had not been motivated by the existential reality itself which was sometimes able to surpass fiction itself. Consequently, artistic fiction and fabulation are not understood in the sense of a legible, visual content or morphology of the work, but as an essential element of the ideological character of the complete art scene, regardless of the artistic languages to which the fragments of this scene gravitate. Namely, accounts do not converge in narration or figuration but in the method and are beyond those worn-out notions. This is a metalanguage of a different quality, one that can narrate although this is not so important to it, one that seduces you and entertains you but never gives you the right answer nor does it impose any norm, let alone the norm of absolute taste.

3. After 1995

In mid-1990s and later, in the post-Dayton (after 1995) period, art displayed a distanced, cynical political engagement, which should not be understood as a mere consequence of the law of action and reaction, but more as a form of expressing critical consciousness, the one that through a roundabout strategy deconstructs symbols of political power. In a moment, it referred to the concept, representations, and consequences of violence. Mediated representations of the instruments of violence have served as a medium for de-canonizing of a totalitarian structure. In works of some artists, art offered toys of violence and instruments of death, weapons as forms of popularization of monstrosity and demystification of the demagogically-heroic. Such an acceptance of a part of political

⁶ David Albahari, The Author's Remark, in: *Snow Man*, Beograd, 1996.

responsibility, with creation of an artificial-popular image, mostly reminds of Oldenburg's 1969 work "Lipstick (Ascending) on Caterpillar Tracks," displayed during the Vietnam war. Perhaps some artists went a step further, shaking the very identity of a work of art. The case of Belgrade artist Srdjan Apostolovic is quite interesting. In 1995 he made a series of sculptures, projected so that they can potentially function as weapons, as sculptures "which can kill." This idea of art as a "publicity of fear" is in another way expressed in a series of works of Mrdjan Bajic, "Daddy's Gift" (from 1995), a heap of sculptures-bombs, little tanks, machetes, etc.; a difference between a dream-fairy tale and a nightmare is really thin, danger is attractive, fear is a game, and toys of fear are colorful and seductive. In 1995 Dragan Srdic organized "A great selling exhibition of bombs." Thus, a gallery became a storage for real bombs, a concept of the ready-made has been combined here with a bare and brutal message, devoid of intent to even imitate any aesthetic content. Just like Oldenburg, Rasa Todosijevic in his cycle "Gott Liebt die Serben," bared a pornographic thought of violence, with a critical-ironic attitude towards the kitsch of a national megalomania.

4. 1998

After the municipal elections of 1996/97, the first, and so far the most visible, move of the new Belgrade (opposition) government, has been taking down of the star from the dome of the City Hall, and putting instead of a two-headed eagle, an old state and royal symbol. It was similar to the actions from more recent history of the whole of Eastern Europe and ex-Yugoslavia: a destruction of monuments and changes in the streets' names are a specific cathartic phenomenon which orders a semantic landscape, thus providing for an illusion of a thorough change.

It is difficult to imagine that at the moment Yugoslav contemporary art could have an ambition or a project of creating a new value, that would grow on ruins of the old ones. What the art has learned in the last fifty years or so, is that it must not (should not) be "a civilization's outer shell." Thus, it has found itself, unavoidably, on a waste land, no one's land. What we are witnessing now is building of an attitude of personal responsibility, but devoid of "cheap optimism" when it comes to politics, history, and, generally speaking, future. Perhaps the background of culture is, as Jameson claims, made up by blood, torture, death, and horror, witnessed in the most literal way by the Yugoslav experience of 1990s. On the other hand, decoding of some totalitarian concepts of the society would have never happened, if the art did not have in view a Duchampian attitude – that the

body of the art has been pierced by the arrows of the ridiculous. However, after watering down of the positive spirit of the last year's protest and perverting of most of its ideals, the question remains whether our chosen way will unavoidably lead us towards a closed, cynical structure, within which "the issues of self-preservation shall be equated with the issues of self-destruction."

Note:

The parts of this text are published in the recent *Moscow Art Magazine* issue (1998).
The text has been written in February 1998.