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**Cynderella Syndrome and
Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde Syndrome**

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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.

Suzana Milevska

Cinderella Syndrome and Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde Syndrome

(An attempt for creating a more flexible model of interpretation and selection of the non-Western art)

Once upon a time there was a prince who tried very hard to find his desired princess that would fit in the shoe of the unknown beautiful woman. It could have been anybody only if the shoe and the foot belonged to each other. You can easily recognize that in the prince from this story hides a metaphor for a contemporary Western curator.

Such a romantic belief that there is only one perfect matching for the once found model still exists in the head of the Western curators who try to find the appropriate artists for their exhibition according to their imagined model/shoe, a model established according to the principles and concepts developed in the Western cultural context. Whenever a new grand project or a Biennial exhibition takes place the curators (and not only ones of Western origin but also curators coming from other countries if employed and delegated by any of the relevant art institutions of the Western origin) are running all around the world trying to find the appropriate feet for their shoe/concept.

This anecdotal comparison between the fairy-tale of Cinderella and the contemporary art situation in the Eastern Countries I firstly mentioned during my presentation at the AICA round table during the Manifesta 2 European Biennial in Luxembourg 1998. Since then there was lots of positive referring to this my presentation (that did not exist in written form), but also critical reports. The both were results mostly due to the simplification that I have used that obviously appealed to the first and were too rigid for the latter group.

The critics of the obvious and simple metaphor neglected one fact: that the tradition of telling stories, fairy-tales, parables, myths and legends is still alive in the countries with rich narrative heritage and that it exists not only in the literature structure but also exists as interwoven pattern in the structure of the visual arts. It is one of the most important misunderstandings not only between the Western curators and Eastern artists, but also between the Western and Eastern curators, that can be revealed here as a relevant root for the superficial understanding or complete misinterpreting not only of my text, even by the ones who quoted it with a positive acceptance, but also of many other concepts and projects coming from East.

Here I would like to remind you of the complexity of the relation between the concept of art that is accepted through the relevant institution of art in the West and the concept that the Eastern European artists are using and interpreting as Western. A little gap, a hiatus is present here due to the difference between the desire and reality. The wishful thinking of the Eastern artists to use and interpret the Western codes as of their own inherited culture becomes more complex at the moment when they start creating art while using the Western historic artistic codes mixing them with the ideas, forms and media found locally.

Namely, the inevitable mixture between the found codes taken from the art and art history coming from West (ideas, thus, are treated as “found objects”) disables the establishment of the original meaning and burdens the linear Western history of art with new patterns that become illegible by the mind without experience with such patterns. The structure of the art concepts doesn't matter how complex they are, even in the cases of the conceptual art works with philosophical background, usually is to be cleaned and pilled off from any mythical narrative structure in order to be considered by the rational mind of any serious art critic. Not only once I have faced the confused expression on the face of my colleagues visiting Macedonian artists who use their knowledge of the local heritage, religious, mythical or simple story telling: they have usually treated that authentic way of expression as overwhelming or exaggerating.

The question that arises here is the question of the balance between the issue of value and the issue of comprehension. How can anybody evaluate something that is not comprehensible in his/her mind especially when the criteria of evaluation come from a completely different system of values becomes an inevitable problem. If the system of evaluation (or at least selection) comes from the logo-centric point of view the only possible consequence of such evaluation system would be that any usage of

irrational mental concepts would result with art that is loaded with too many illegible codes that make the works of art unreachable and incomprehensible to the viewer.

What would be the explanation and the solution to this problem, if any? The questions to pose here would be should the artists coming from regions overloaded with problems of unsolved historical and identity problems just abandon the myths of the past and try to present the issues that they are concerned with in a rational, more direct Western way in order to become more understandable for the audience that is not used to such approach or, should the Western critics and curators try to get more profound knowledge about the unknown histories and cultures? And, finally, is there a short cut possibility, a kind of East digest version of the codes needed to understand such differences.

Of course, similar problems in reading art concepts, even more radical, exist in the attempt or understanding and interpreting any non-Western art. The problem sometimes can be extended even to the point that even the usage of the term “art” is questionable. That is one of the problems that all non-Western art activities share: the pattern of myths, legends and other inherited cultural structures often are interpreted as anthropological phenomenon or folklore, art of a lower level. When it comes to the discussion of the issues and values of contemporary art the problem of high and low art can be much easily extended in the realm of unknown and far cultures and arts. Thus, the art that deals with historic or mythic background and preserves fragments of the old traditional art expression or media, can be underestimated for that reason only.

Two different proves for such conclusion can be presented here: the cases when artists of non-Western background are ignored or rejected from selection for representative models of exhibition only because the form or the content of their art works do not satisfy the model of representation appreciated by the curator/selector or the cases when the artists are selected as representatives of their countries and cultures only because of using the inherited patterns. While the first example is explicable more obviously, the second example needs a little bit more careful elaboration. Namely, when using an artwork as a representative example for regional art development the danger is that such position also gives way to superficial and limited interpretations. Going back to the argument of the conflict of different codification that is uncircumventionable in the contemporary art world, any artist, even when using some of the archaic regional patterns, should be let free to combine them with the new patterns and interpret them

in new, contemporary or even Western way, which process often has more to do with the complete new achieved art concepts than with the fairy-tales of their grannies. The expected patterns from the artists, whether the need for them to be critical and politically engaged or to be recognizable according to the material and narrative structure that they use, are the limits of the context where they come from that, although important, overwhelm both the artists and curators.

Thus, this text should be understood as a call for flexibility of interpretation of the Eastern and other non-Western art in the same way as the interpretation is proceeded when it is applied to the art works of the Western artist (it is almost impossible to define any artist who would be a "typical" representative of USA or any other Western country or region although there are attempts and phenomena as YBA), not as a representative example for simplified exercises for defining the art of the "unknown Other" but as a possibility for profound research of a new, third way, or a kind of "double production" – to use the concept mentioned by Sarat Maharaj at the AICA Congress held in Tate Modern in London 2000. Another problem within the interpretation framework of the East-West hermeneutic paradigm would be the new established need for politically correct art, a paradigm established within Western democratic society model that cannot be transferred and imported easily in the Eastern cultural context.

The subtitle of this text could also be "is there a difference between social realism and politically correct art", a question that is quite often posted among the art historians in the Eastern countries today. Namely, the polemic about the art that is engaged in the issues determined by the political and social situation has completely different background in the countries with socialistic and communistic history than in the countries where those ideas have never been ideological and political "winners". These, at the first sight, opaque comparisons and confusions are result of the specific context of the countries that are faced with the wish to implement the idea of the politically correct art understood as a democratic turn after the experience of the social realism.

The second part of the title of this text came out of the fact that it has always been rather confusing who was the "good guy" and who was the "bad guy" in the famous novel "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde": whether the curious doctor or the result of his researches is more responsible for his violent acts. The same goes for the politically correct art - whenever we try to differentiate what is positive and what is problematic with possible

negative consequences within this phenomenon (becoming so popular as an attempt to meet the new democratized standards in the culture coming from abroad) we come to the same ambivalence.

It is a phenomenon inherited from the very beginnings of the avant-garde movements of the beginning of the century and from the need of inventing new and radical models for expressing the artistic freedom that is usually identified with the political freedom of expression. Any attempt to systematize the modernistic task and chase for the ideal form and the realistic social criticism and to define the phenomena of the modernism and realism as polarities becomes impossible enterprise mainly because of the paradoxical appearance of the artists that were acting as leaders of the abstract art, but in their own terms they were committed to the aim to invent artistic identities for the new social phenomena.

Exactly as the phenomenon of an continual interfering of the abstraction, realism and surrealism with the new ideological statements of the communism, fascism and liberal capitalism appeared during the beginning of this century, today we are facing an even more complex interweaving of the conflicts between the aesthetically ideologized "political correct art", so dominant at the art scenes in the Western democratic societies and its perverted variant in the Eastern transitional milieu. The first comment of the local intellectuals and artists is predictable "what would be the difference between this politically correct art and the old good practice - the key principle during the socialism". We all went through the Dr. Jekyll's phase of the positive experiment with the equal representing of all, not according to the talent but according to the belonging to some of the marginalized groups, but at the same time we all know the Mr. Hyde's consequences of this equilibrium as well.

In order to avoid the danger of being blamed for interpolating incorrect doubts in the basic ethical principles posted with the recurrence of the moral and the social engagement as legitimate principles in the postmodern art theory that had confronted the l'art pour l'art perverted purified modernistic claim for isolating of the ethical qualities of a work of art from its intrinsic and "essential" qualities, here I would like to stress the difference between the politically correct art that is repulsive to the Eastern artists and the one that is practiced by the contemporary Western artists. The insisting on engagement and artistic action in relation to the real social context that used to be imposed by the state as the only sponsor and controller, thus becoming author of the social realism is not even close to

the engagement of the artists that question the common globally accepted principles and criteria through their art concepts.

Until the order of the engaged art comes from one center of power, one mystically based authority and hidden repressive violence of imposed ideas that was specific for the time of social realism (but sometimes becomes similar when it comes from different sources - foundation's programs) the "politically correct art" is correct only from one aspect; from the one proclaimed by the running ideology or art theory. At the first moment when appear more centers of power and more different ideologies ordering "correct art" this term starts to be problematized and thus contingent. Although the statement that this would be the first moment of the reification of the term itself sounds paradoxically, it is a very logical thesis: the term "correctness" is founded on the trust in the rights of each individual but it is also well known that the interests of the individuals differ (Lyotard "Le Differend"). Moreover, they are usually in the relation of radical conflict with each other so that any solving of that conflict would be incorrect for one of the sides. Therefore the politically correct art, the art that leaves the safety position of the aesthetic formalism and delves in non-artistic problems from the everyday life, hoping that will find artistic means to stress and make them obvious and maybe help to solve them, always comes to the danger to become incorrect for someone that was not taken into account but who can have consequences because of it.

In fact, the work of Žaneta Vangeli (1962) Ex-FYROM-ism, realized in 1998, is very ambiguous when trying to define it whether is politically correct: on the photo (manipulated by computer) of a man with his hands on the floor preparing to jump with his legs in the air is written "NATO"; on the second photo of the same man standing upside down on his hands is written "META-DESIGNER". The third photo (printed as all the previous ones as ink jet prints) is showing enlarged photo of a tattoo on the arm of a local kick-boxer representing a punk pissing on the earth-globe. What is politically correct always depends who judges the level of correctness since there are always different sides of the political power game.

The other artist who is worth to be mentioned here is Aleksandar Stankovski with his art film MAKLABAS (1998), (BETA transferred on 35 mm) where the photos of Hitler have been animated and turned in images of devil with a lot of references and anticipation of the NATO bombing on FR Yugoslavia, the border neighbouring country to Macedonia. His complex installation A Portrait of the Citizen from FYROM (1998), includes four maps of imaginary states as "Big Albania", "Big Serbia" or "Big Bulgaria"

(countries that all showed hegemonistic tendencies toward Macedonia). It also consists of photos showing several young man "lost" on the soil of their own country without official name (FYROM is only a short for Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia that the United Nations invented in order to prevent the Macedonians from usage of the name Macedonia because of the arguments with Greece). At the first presentation of this project at the group exhibition "Portrait 1111" in Havzi Pashini Konaci in Skopje the artist's attempt to deconstruct the ambitions of the "big cartographer" NATO to revive these "ghost maps" from the past was critically forwarded by the WORLD CUP program in live, presented on several TV sets in the exhibition: the uninterested ordinary citizen of Macedonia who watches football game rather than to be informed about his own destiny was also prophetic taking in account the latest indifference that the Macedonians showed in several occasions during the NATO attack of its the nearest neighbour.

Of course, as a most obvious case of the danger from the political correctness can be taken into account the film *Before the Rain* (1995) by Milcho Manchevski that employed all known and accepted stereotypes of the relations between the Macedonian population and Albanian minority that brought him the international fame but left the question of the profound questioning of the representation of the Other and the Eastern-Western split in the paradigm of interpretation of the political correct art unanswered.

The power game within the realm of interpretation strategies is still going on and the marginal cultures, somehow, have always had difficulties to become part of them.