

# Antinomies of Post-Socialist Autonomy

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The following essay<sup>1</sup> aims to elucidate the meanings and functions of autonomy within the post-socialist framework of peripheral neo-liberal political economy of “cultural production” in the former Yugoslavia region or, as the contemporary geopolitical agenda terms it, the Western Balkans.<sup>2</sup> It will also present efforts to address the possibilities and practical strategies concerning the struggle for autonomy in the field of “independent cultural activism.”

The transition from “really existing” socialism to liberal democracy and the free-market economy (i.e. capitalism) is often seen as a transition from the state of heteronomy, of being determined by the “Other” (by the State and the Party), to autonomy or self-determination. This view follows, in a certain way, what Kant referred to in his essay “What is Enlightenment?”<sup>3</sup> as the transition from self-inflicted immaturity to full maturity, in the sense of taking responsibility for one’s own beliefs and actions. The dominant neo-liberalism presents itself precisely as a wake-up call, a reminder to everyone that it is time to “grow up,” “get serious” and take responsibility for one’s own self. This means to market one’s self, to become the so-called “prosumer,” being at the same time one’s own labor-force and employer, as well as financial, marketing and PR manager, not “finding,” but “creating” jobs, “self-organizing” one’s health security and pension – in short, waging an everyday and never-ending fight for one’s ever-precarious place on the “open market.” Socialism is therefore seen as a tucked-in and safe time when at least everyone’s basic material needs were both looked after and taken care of. It seems like it is precisely this maternal care – and the paternalism, too – from the State, for sustaining its subjects through administrative networks of collective employment, social security systems, so-called social health care and pension funds etc, which allegedly provided the leisure time for developing childish ideas about the possibilities of radical change – revolution.<sup>4</sup>

From this perspective of peripheral neo-liberalism, the advent of capitalism in former Yugoslavia (through the destruction of the socialist federal state and through both civil and “humanitarian” wars) seems precisely like the transition from the heteronomy imposed by the socialist system – being completely dependent on the decisions and whims of State and Party – to the autonomy enjoyed by “finally” aligning with the “free world.” This dominant post-socialist “reasoning” is not only inviting – or rather, ordering – people to exit their immaturity, their childish dependence on the “Other” and to become solipsistic entrepreneurial subjects within the “social free-market economy,” but also to become aware of their own rights to self-determination as members of a certain cultural (national, ethnic or confessional) group. This kind of autonomy is perceived in the former Yugoslavia region as the final achievement of a “thousand year dream” of national – in fact, ethno-nationalist – self-determination for the newly-formed states, thus retroactively making socialist Yugoslavia a “prison-house of nations.” The dominant post-socialist perception of autonomy therefore serves the purpose of rendering socialist Yugoslavia, the communist movement and Marxism into something that has been definitively surpassed, belonging to the past’s long gone times of repression, and reaffirms the anti-communist “consensus” as the main ideological support of contemporary neo-liberalism. It is precisely this zealous anti-communism that unifies the apparently opposed political options of “democratic” pro-Europeanism and “patriotic” nationalism, religious chauvinism and the struggle for human rights, a re-traditionalized culture of “our fore-fathers” and a democratic culture of civil society, the identity politics of nation-state building and multi- or inter-culturalism.

<sup>1</sup> The ideas presented in this essay were developed within the *Frontbildung* project as a part of Hamburg’s festival *Wir Sind Woanders* # 2 that took place in October 2006 ([http://www.wirsindwoanders.de/files\\_2007/index\\_allE.php?seite=3&folge=00](http://www.wirsindwoanders.de/files_2007/index_allE.php?seite=3&folge=00)).

<sup>2</sup> This new geopolitical area encompasses the newly formed ex-Yugoslav states, minus Slovenia (now a fully-fledged EU member-state) plus Albania, thus representing “ascending” countries which still need “cultivating” in order to achieve full EU membership.

<sup>3</sup> Cf., for instance, <http://www.english.upenn.edu/~mgamer/Etexts/kant.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. editorial to the chapter “Against Post-Socialist Reason” in: *Prelom* 8, edition in English, <http://www.prelomkolektiv.org/eng/08.htm>, p 8)

Obviously, “culture” represents an important stake in this constellation of nation-state building<sup>5</sup> – aiming to purge “nations” from their communist past and “modernizing” them for their re-unification with the “international community.” It is precisely this project of isolating and separating “nations” and, subsequently, re-assembling them within the EU that facilitates the seemingly paradoxical partnership of advocates of both pan-European and ethno-national cultures. Although local elites and their nation-building ideologues declare fidelity to the EU project<sup>6</sup> the actual political and cultural policies remain self-enclosed and hostile to most forms of regional exchange. On one hand, official local cultural policies still favour programmes and projects which aim to create a strong and exclusive national identity. On the other, the ruling elites have recognized the need for a more intensive regional collaboration as a necessity for joining the EU, but whenever regional cooperation is mentioned they claim that no one wants to be part of anything resembling the old “repressive” communist ideology of Brotherhood and Unity.

For the more “progressive” EU policies and institutions, culture is also an indispensable vehicle of a new, “innovative” geo-political agenda. The basic infrastructure for capitalist “development” was set up in the peripheral states of Eastern Europe after the post-1989 “rectifying revolutions”<sup>7</sup> and a transitional period of establishing constitutional, parliamentary democracies and the free market economy during the 1990s, thus leaving unfinished the task of supplying capitalist development with a necessary superstructure. Since the old liberal ideology of personal achievement through “free trade” lost its grip almost a century ago, it had to be supplemented with something that would respond to the situation of a vanished bipolar world, globalization and the “end of ideologies.” Enter multiculturalism as an injection that would simultaneously inoculate people of the periphery with the “eternal values of democratic culture” and reinvigorate capitalism itself with a post-colonial twist. Multiculturalism actually facilitates a seemingly paradoxical unification through differentiation,<sup>8</sup> since it operates on two registers. The first asserts its “democratic” character by making each and every “culture” equal in value, but also having an equal right to express and preserve itself. Therefore, it is perceived as compassionate, humane and non-discriminatory, but also as exclusivist, chauvinist and discriminatory, since this expressing and preserving of a culture is often seen as a right to “defend” it against other cultures that “threaten” its existence. However, the second register imposes a political division precisely between those two perceptions by differentiating “essentialists” (those who believe in a consistent and unchangeable underlying substance of their cultural identity whose invariable and fixed properties separate them from all the “others”) from those who are aware of the so-called multicultural “normality,” that requires “democratic” negotiation of one’s own, as well as others’, multiple cultural identities. Multiculturalism, as well as its official successor – interculturalism, is therefore little less than colonial racism cloaked in the form of an “empty universality.”<sup>9</sup>

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5 It is enough to recall the process of creating and implementing the official languages of the newly formed ex-Yugoslav states, whereby the same common language of the majority of Yugoslav peoples – which was called either Serbo-Croatian or Croat-Serbian, containing multiple dialects – exploded into apparently distinct and incomparable, Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian and even Montenegrin.

6 For the overwhelming majority of politicians, joining the EU now stands for almost a millenarist belief in the return of a mythical Golden Age and access to “the land of milk and honey,” but actually covers up their incapability of improving the living standards of the people. While liberals use the banner of “European integration” to present cuts in public funding, privatization, and deregulation as necessities, the right-wing uses it to apotheosize their roots in an “ancient,” white, Christian – even Aryan – Europe.

7 “This rectifying revolution, in so far as it is meant to make possible a return to constitutional democracy and a connection with developed capitalism, is guided by models that orthodox interpretations consider the revolution of 1917 to have made redundant.” (Jürgen Habermas, “What Does Socialism Mean Today? The Rectifying Revolution and the Need for New Thinking on the Left,” *New Left Review* 183, September-October 1990, p. 5)

8 Capitalism always preys on and constantly generates differences, since it is precisely those differences, unevenness and disproportions that facilitate the extraction of surplus value.

9 “[M]ulticulturalism is a disavowed, inverted, self-referential form of racism, a ‘racism with a distance’ – it ‘respects’ the Other’s identity, conceiving the Other as a self-enclosed ‘authentic’ community towards which he, the multiculturalist, maintains a distance rendered possible by his privileged universal position. Multiculturalism is a racism which empties its own position of all positive content (the multiculturalist is not a direct racist, he doesn’t oppose to the Other the *particular* values of his own culture), but nonetheless retains this position as the privileged *empty point of universality* from which one is able to appreciate (and depreciate) properly other particular cultures—the multiculturalist respect for the Other’s specificity is the

In the post-conflictual region of former-Yugoslavia, art and culture are supposed to play the role of reconciling former warring “sides,” thus enabling the “peaceful coexistence of differences” (religious, ethnical, cultural). This is especially evident in the EU agenda for culture – by declaring the year 2008 a year of intercultural dialogue<sup>10</sup> – and in some US foundations’ programs,<sup>11</sup> which, under the banner of “celebrating cultural diversity,” promote a clear political agenda: resolving and preventing violent conflicts, insuring post-conflict stability and peace, creating conflict management capacities and thus enforcing the rule of law through “democratization of culture.”<sup>12</sup> In short, art and culture are supposed to enforce tolerance for the “Other” and full respect of its basic human rights, while the pressing problems of poverty, the dismantling of all social welfare nets, shameless gang-style privatizations and the “unavoidable” wasting of natural resources, as well as tycoon control over governments remain hidden behind this multi-culti lip-service.

It is most especially art that is considered fit for this job of “cultivating” the peoples of capitalist periphery, since it is “autonomous” in its action (as it is always supposed to be the expression of an individual genius). Dominant neo-liberal art history claims that in the case(s) of East European art, it was precisely denied its “autonomy,” meaning that it was exclusively put in service of the Party-and/or-State politics. Therefore, East European art has to be freed from that burden of a shameful soc-realist heritage, and once-and-for-all disentangled from this kind of politicization. The “struggle” for this kind of arts autonomy confirms the traditional place reserved for it in capitalism – as something quite distinct and evidently different from immediate social reality. The aim is precisely to neutralize art’s potential to impact “life” in social and political terms. Nevertheless, neo-liberal policies seek not to completely depoliticize art, but to give it a certain “progressive” political direction. One of the earliest cases of such a policy was the Soros Foundation and its network of Contemporary Art Centers that spread throughout Eastern Europe in the 1990s.<sup>13</sup> Based on Karl Popper’s notion of “open society,” it primarily promoted art whose political tendency could be subsumed under the term “anti-totalitarianism.” Within its revision of history, the only artists that defied Party-State coercion are the currently-celebrated “brave dissidents” who spat in the face of a totalitarian regime. Therefore, the defense of art’s autonomy is aimed at deterring artists from venturing into such devastating projects as socialist realism or Nazi art, thus reviving the dissidence

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very form of asserting one’s own superiority.” (Slavoj Žižek, “Multiculturalism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism,” *New Left Review* 225, September-October 1997, p 44)

10 “For the purposes of the consultation process for the ‘White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue’, the following preliminary formulation may serve as a reference: ‘Intercultural dialogue is an open and respectful exchange between individuals and groups belonging to different cultures that leads up to a deeper understanding of the other’s global perception.’ In this definition, ‘open and respectful’ means ‘based on the equal value of the partners’; ‘exchange of views’ stands for every type of interaction that reveals cultural characteristics; ‘groups’ stands for every type of collective that can act through its representatives (family, community, associations, peoples); ‘culture’ includes everything relating to ways of life, customs, beliefs and other things that have been passed on to us for generations, as well as the various forms of artistic creation; ‘world perception’ stands for values and ways of thinking. [...] In a general sense, the objective of intercultural dialogue is to learn to live together peacefully and constructively in a multicultural world and to develop a sense of community and belonging. Intercultural dialogue can also be a tool for the prevention and resolution of conflicts by enhancing the respect for human rights, democracy and the rule of law.” ([http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/intercultural/concept\\_EN.asp#P30\\_3374](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/intercultural/concept_EN.asp#P30_3374))

11 See, for instance, the page of the United States Institute for Peace: <http://www.usip.org/programs>.

12 Cf. Dušan Grlja and Jelena Vesić, “The Neo-liberal Institution of Culture and the Critique of Culturalization,” <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0208/prelom/en>

13 “[T]he SCCAs dealt mainly with the emancipation of art and culture from the ideological, political and economic control of the state. On the aesthetic level this transition was manifested in the attempt to break with the doctrine of Socialist Realism, with its aesthetic and ideological principles; artists were encouraged to work with new media whereas art historians were to write new art histories, which would evolve around the narrative of the formerly suppressed non-conformism. Economically the SCCAs provided expertise for developing local networks of Western-styled private and corporate art institutions capable of accommodating to the logic of the free market. After escaping the ideological and material control of the state, the centres were to help local artists adjust to a new order, devoting a good part of their efforts to cultural management and fund raising.” (Octavian Eşanu “The Transition of the Soros Centers to Contemporary Art: The Managed Avant-Garde,” [http://www.think-tank.nl/ccck/Esanu\\_ManagedAvant-garde.pdf](http://www.think-tank.nl/ccck/Esanu_ManagedAvant-garde.pdf), p. 7)

ideology<sup>14</sup> articulated in the 1970s. The reheated Cold-war anti-totalitarian ideological device thus serves the purpose of installing the image of socialism as an inherently authoritarian and totalitarian system that crushed any attempt at “autonomous action,” in the sense of the “basic human right” to “freely” – and, of course, “creatively” – express one’s own individuality.

It is those “progressive” institutions and foundations – in a seemingly paradoxical convergence with local forces<sup>15</sup> – that, by supporting “socially responsive art,” are actually creating the environment that corresponds to the needs of the neo-liberal political economy of “cultural production,” making us “cultural workers/producers” or even the so-called “content makers” for the expanding “cultural industries.” Although we criticize, resist and oppose this kind of positioning, as well as the whole constellation that produces it, the objective, material practices that we willy-nilly engage in are driving our activities in the direction of neo-liberal cultural entrepreneurship.<sup>16</sup> Keeping this situation in mind, one has to ask how it is possible to critically operate within it and enable autonomous, independent and self-determinative action. In other words, taking a self-critical view of the activities of *Prelom kolektiv*,<sup>17</sup> the question is: How does an initiative of young critically-minded theorists from the fields of visual arts, cinema, philosophy and political theory in favor of making a break, an rupture – *prelom* is translation of the Althusserian term *coupure* – with the dominant neo-liberal ideology, steer clear of being, at the end of the day, functional for the cultural industries and contemporary political economy of “cultural production”?

The answer is all too familiar for anyone who had ever tried to act in the sphere of “independent cultural activism” anywhere in today’s globalized world. No matter how critical, subversive or, even, revolutionary the idea one might have, it has to be *produced* – in the both meanings of the Latin word *producere*: to build or craft something, and to make something visible. Since the means of production are either owned or controlled by capital, it has to be somehow wrenched out of it. The usual way is to formulate a “project” and apply for support of either local national or those international “progressive” cultural institutions and foundations. Further, this involvement in creating

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14 “This [...] is] what Robert Lihart quite rightly calls ‘Western dissidence ideology’ – a novel ideological formation that ends up making ‘dissidence’ the slogan for major political disengagement by the intellectuals, in favour of a ‘revolt’ (‘resistance’ or ‘rebellion’) that is nothing more than the name for a *refusal*: a refusal to participate in the mass struggles that could yield a revolutionary outcome to the crisis we are living through.” (Dominique Lecourt, *Mediocracy: French Philosophy since 1968*, Verso, London, 2001, p 150)

15 “The logos of international liberal NGO’s stamped on brochures, publications, invitations and posters [...] add a tinge to progressive political practices that leave one with a sense of ambivalence and uneasiness. Being inevitably material, cultural practices find themselves operating within limited fields of possibilities encircled by the material conditions of international institutions, by the limits of ‘legitimate’ discourses eligible for funding, by what counts as recognizable and intelligible forms of injustice and suffering. One realizes that international NGO’s have in fact successfully conditioned the field of political visibility according to its own logic and its own terms. As a result, social and cultural activists critical of these institutional conditions find themselves in the grip of a double-bind: they face the choice of voicing a powerful message at the risk of advancing global neo-liberal projects. The opposite is also true: labeled as uncritical pro-western propaganda, these conditions have provided the right-wing’s most powerful argument to delegitimize any attempts on the part of the left to challenge practices of exclusion and discourses of hate. They have also enabled old nationalisms to reinvent themselves anew against the presence of international liberal agents.” (Zhivka Valiavicharska, “Culture, Neo-liberal Development, and the Future of Progressive Politics in Southeastern Europe,” in Jonathan Harris [ed.] *Globalization and Contemporary Art*, Blackwell Publishing, Malden, MA, [forthcoming].)

16 “Recent decades have [...] witnessed an obvious neo-liberal effort to subdue ‘culture’ to the mechanisms of the free-market economy in the sense of the culturalization of the economy or, conversely, the economization of culture. The principles of free-market competitiveness and entrepreneurship have been introduced to the once privileged sphere of artistic and intellectual production. This means not only simply bringing market relations into the ‘sphere of culture’, but is more about establishing the practices of entrepreneurship at the individual level – at the level of the subject. [...] What is actually happening is that individuals educated or self-educated in the fields of art, theory and culture in general have a certain privileged access to so-called ‘cultural capital’ – a set of symbols, images, notions, ideas, representations of historical events and persons, art-works, etc. The cultural worker today has to be a cultural entrepreneur at the same time: one who ‘creatively’ – meaning profitably – uses the ‘cultural capital’ which is at hand. In another words, the cultural producer is supposed to be a ‘funky businessman’ in contemporary ‘karaoke capitalism’, transforming this raw material of ‘culture’ into little more than temporary entertainment.” (Dušan Grlja and Jelena Vesić, op. cit.)

17 More info on [www.prelomkolektiv.org](http://www.prelomkolektiv.org).

and executing such “projects” means that one must attain a recognizable legal status, either as individual artist or theorist, or as a collective subject, which usually takes the form of an NGO. It is only on the basis of this legal subjectivity that one may open a bank account in order to get financial support. This also means subjecting oneself to “managing” and paying the administration and accounting needed for applying and using funds, as well as being subjected to financial regulations, tax obligations and monetary constraints, thus adopting the practices of a capitalist enterprise (although a “non-profitable” one).<sup>18</sup>

So, are there any possibilities for being autonomous within this constellation, since it is quite impossible to be independent in the strong sense? Well, this “sacrifice” of being not completely independent enables one to step into the very battlefield where this neo-liberal political economy of “cultural production” is being (re)created, and to use this opportunity for making interventions within it. The strategy of intervention<sup>19</sup> means to consciously – with a grasp of the present conjuncture – act with, as much as possible, a clear aim to get involved in order to produce a certain effect, an effect that can give insight, reveal the “truth” of the dominant logic of “cultural production.” It stands for an effort to produce breaks or ruptures with it, in order to add to a possible process of condensation, of making a ruptural unity of contradictions<sup>20</sup> that we all witness. Thus, achieving autonomy, in the sense of making an independent action, is not just a simple matter of “stepping outside,” making a break and completely separating oneself from the culture industry and the dominant art system. It is rather an effort to make breaks within them. This also means that autonomy cannot be a definite state one may finally achieve, but a constant process of autonomization, of waging an ever precarious battle by constantly (re)inventing interventions.

This constant (re)invention – which entails self-critical insight – is crucial, since the effects of an intervention can easily slip into opposite directions.<sup>21</sup> On the one hand, an intervention could become a part of the neo-liberal production of critical discourse. The last couple of decades witnessed an effort – which becomes almost an obligatory request – to produce criticism within the “sphere of culture,” especially in artistic and intellectual production. This is particularly evident in the practice of various discursive events, publications and web-projects regularly produced on the margins of various

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18 One could disagree that the involvement in this kind of economy is necessary since there are “alternative economies” based on unconstrained barter of goods and services, and solidarity in exchange. But, as long as the production (of culture) requires some possession of the general equivalent (money), this “free exchange” will always be subsumed under the capitalist mode of production. Moreover, those “alternative economies” – since they can never be completely exempted from the capitalist commodity-monetary relations – can actually prove to be functional for contemporary neo-liberal economy by their virtue of actually lowering the market value of one’s labor. In other words, the (cultural) products are much cheaper to make this way than within the professional framework of the existing (cultural) institutions – not to mention that “alternative economies” with their enthusiast and DIY practices foster the expansion of the so-called “creativity” as the fundamental asset for neo-liberal economy.

19 We perceive intervention – following Louis Althusser – as something like jumping into the moving train. To use a metaphor, intervention is like a signal-gun shot over the battlefield that lights the trenches in the darkness of the dominant ideology. Intervention means producing an effect that enables the present positions and divisions to become evident. Therefore, it is a *production* – making something appear that was not visible before the intervention. It enables some different divisions to be drawn, divisions that do not follow hegemonic binary or “organized” differences. They are new divisions that strive to change the very ground upon which the old ones are based.

20 Cf. Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, The Penguin Press, London, 1969, pp. 99-100 (online: <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1965/index.htm>)

21 “It is therefore necessary to fight, if not everywhere at the same time, at least on several fronts, taking account both of the principal tendency and of the secondary tendencies, both of the principal stake and of the secondary stakes, while all the time ‘working’ to occupy correct positions. All this will obviously not come about through the miracle of a consciousness capable of dealing with all problems with perfect clarity. There is no miracle. A Marxist philosopher able to intervene in the theoretical class struggle must start out from positions already recognized and established in the theoretical battles of the history of the Labour Movement – but he can only understand the existing state of the theoretical and ideological ‘terrain’ if he comes to know it both theoretically and practically: in and through struggle. It may be that in the course of his endeavours, even when he starts out from already established positions in order to attack open or disguised enemies, he will take up positions which in the course of struggle are shown to be *deviant* positions, out of step with the correct line which he is aiming for. There is nothing astonishing in that. The essential thing is that he should then recognize his deviation and rectify his positions in order to make them more correct.” (Louis Althusser, *Essays in Self-Criticism*, NLB, London, 1976, pp. 143-144)

art shows, whereby theory is dwindled to a status of a “decorative authority.”<sup>22</sup> Those instances supposedly have the task of providing a space for reflection and criticism, but they actually serve to present an opportunity to neutralize, domesticate and eventually appropriate any critical opposition through the manifold mechanism of culturalization<sup>23</sup> – by making every given political content and tendency cultural, and to “culturalize” the “actors” in the sense of respecting civic conventions of cultural conduct and tolerance for the Other. This is precisely where the critical and oppositional stance gets twisted and ultimately co-opted by the exigencies of the contemporary political economy of “culture production,” presenting us as nothing more than functional “discontent providers.” On the other hand, projects that we are involved in, like the “Political Practices of (Post)Yugoslav Art,”<sup>24</sup> can be locally interpreted as Yugo-nostalgia,<sup>25</sup> which is always an opportunity to inspire “national sentiments” of the extreme-right *Lumpenproletariat* and their ideologues, their being little more than an unavowed forefront of the official national culture.

So, at the end, what does it mean to be autonomous, to be able to effectuate self-determinative action? Self-determination can be a misleading term since it refers to an individual process traditionally conceived by Hegel as the Idea’s dialectical movement of passage from “by-itself” to “for-itself” through externalization, alienation and de-alienation. This is a classical model for a single consciousness arriving to self-consciousness through an almost mystical enlightenment. In reality, there is no self-determination *stricto sensu*, since some kind of “externality” is always needed for the formation of self-consciousness or subjectivity. In other words, there is a dialectical movement in the very *Bildung* (meaning both self-formation and education) of a subjectivity which is always an outcome of the struggle for identification and differentiation from that external instance. But, this is by no means a “spiritual” move, since it is always happens in respect to material circumstances and concrete events. Consequently, autonomy cannot be achieved as an individual accomplishment, since it entails a collective material practice and a social dimension – changing dominant social institutions. Since institutions are less particular buildings populated with administration (and upheld by a hierarchy of positions with a top-down structure of decisions) than they are institutionalized – power-structured and socially sanctioned – behavior or conduct, self-determining activity must commence with the practical countering of established structures that shape social interaction. In the case of the organizational form of the NGO, this means establishing a different type of social bond than the dominant capitalist “NGO economy” that relies heavily on a US-style internship system to perform the necessary but routine gofer roles that hold it all together. This is effectively a scheme of

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22 “[W]e see a kind of overproduction of theory, as well as the staging of this theory as a decorative ‘appendix’ to artistic and activist events (i.e., theoretical conferences as discursive platforms for all manner of biennials, major exhibitions, social forums, etc.). We can observe numerous instances of the overproduction, commercialization, and ‘decorativeness’ of theory – for example, quite scholarly but secondary texts chockablock with citations of the most ‘fashionable’ names and texts, or all those thick but incomprehensible catalogues and ‘theoretical documents’ published in connection with art projects. [...] All this is crowned by a system of intellectual ‘superstars’, who, even when they take quite radical, critical stances, are unable to resist their quite decorative function as thinkers and ‘keynote speakers’ at an endless series of seminars and conferences.” (Alexey Penzin / Dmitry Vilensky, “What’s the Use? Art, Philosophy, and Subject Formation. A Chto Delat dialogue,” *Chto Delat?*, 01-25, March 2009, p 2, also on: [http://www.chtodelat.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=category&id=204&Itemid=282&lang=en](http://www.chtodelat.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&id=204&Itemid=282&lang=en))

23 “The logic of the contemporary usage of ‘culture’ is evident in the neo-liberal strategy of the *culturalization* of political relations – as Boris Buden has called it. What it indicates is less an almost total breakdown of the “political sphere” in its modern sense, but more its significant transformation. The articulation of political struggles and social antagonisms have moved from the ‘classical’ domain of the state apparatuses such as political parties, the parliamentary system and the procedures of the Rule of Law to the dispersed field of competing ‘cultural options’. Yet culturalization exceeds the simple translation of political issues to cultural ones. Culturalization is also a ‘school of culture’: the education, cultivation, and breeding of subjects for the dominant culture. [It also] culturalize[s] us in order to renounce the ‘non-civic’ or, simply, ‘uncivilized’ ways of solving conflicts by adopting the ‘non-violent’, symbolic mechanisms that the ‘cultural field’ supposedly offers. [...] Therefore, culturalization has an important function within today’s neo-liberal capitalist system – the function of pacification and neutralization of contemporary social antagonisms.” (Dušan Grlja and Jelena Vesić, op. cit.)

24 More on the Political Practices of (Post-)Yugoslav Art project on <http://www.kuda.org/en?q=node/555>

25 Cf. editorial to the chapter “Against Post-Socialist Reason” in: *Prelom* 8, op. cit.



bourgeois apprenticeships or – putting it more bluntly – a minute and up-dated system of capitalist exploitation that needs to be fought from the very outset.<sup>26</sup>

Autonomy is hence coterminous with the process of subject formation. It does not entail the passive production of the individuals necessary for a given social system, but a self-determinative process of making a reflective and deliberative collective subject. This process is grounded in making an ethical choice. Subjectivity proper always stems out of the collective material practice of making an ethical choice in a given situation by breaking with dominant “rationality.” Autonomy, i.e. the *Bildung* of an subjectivity, can thus be achieved through a process of (con)testing the limits of a given “rationality.” It always emerges from an autonomizing act – which is precisely an event – and the fidelity to it. Therefore, one must endure in her/his critique and remain faithful to the event of publicly stating what are the motives, insights and experiences that brought one to – at least – speak it out.<sup>27</sup>

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26 Cf. Dušan Grlja and Jelena Vesić, op. cit.

27 “Courage [...] is the virtue which manifests itself through endurance in the impossible. This is not simply a matter of a momentary encounter with the impossible: that would be heroism, not courage. Heroism has always been represented not as a virtue but as a posture: as the moment when one turns to meet the impossible face to face. The virtue of courage constructs itself through endurance within the impossible; time is its raw material.” (Alain Badiou, “The Communist Hypothesis,” *New Left Review* 49, January-February 2008, p. 41.)