

“It is Not Future That Always Comes After”

(Some reflections on the project “Political Practices of (Post-) Yugoslav Art”)

Branislav Dimitrijević

Back in the 50s and the 60s, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) was seen by many on the Left as the model country for developing the system of workers’ self-management and for introducing new property relations with the concept of “social property,” instead of private property characterizing the capitalist system and state property characterizing the Soviet-type socialism. Yet, for those further to the left, SFRY was a revisionist country which by the early 70s developed a kind of “*il socialismo borghese*” [“bourgeois socialism”] – as coined by one Italian communist after seeing the emerging development of new private houses and weekend “*dachas*” belonging to the members of the new elite (the “red bourgeoisie”) and especially to the new class of technocrats appearing as a consequence of the economic reforms in the mid 60s. These reforms allowed limited private ownership (small manufactures and small trade), yet maintained bureaucratic state control over production, which means that SFRY was actually a country with three types of ownerships.

SFRY was also viewed as the most liberal of all “real-socialist” countries (with freedoms of travel abroad and creativity, and even allowing some manifestations of political dissent), therefore admired by European social democrats as well as by many liberals: it provided the so called model for “socialism with a human face.” The story of the collapse of SFRY has been mostly seen as an extreme manifestation of the general collapse of “communism” in the late 80s. However, what collapsed in SFRY was not some hard-line communist dictatorship (*à la* Ceausescu’s Romania or Hoxha’s Albania), but a model very close to reformist social democracy (minus the multi-party system). Consequently, we have to see the end of Yugoslavia as parallel to the crumbling of social democracy during the reactionary 80s: the end of Yugoslavia was just an aspect of the general crisis of social democracy rather than the end of some stringent communist autocracy. Also, apart from being an ethnic conflict, the war in Yugoslavia offered the symptomatic model of privatisation, of the “original accumulation of capital” (always achieved through “resource extraction, conquest and plunder, or enslavement,” as Marx summed it), so this war was the Real of the celebrated capitalist transition in Eastern Europe. Therefore, in fact the end of SFRY marked, first of all, the end of the post World War 2 ideal of social democracy (prevailing in the programs of major socialist political parties in power in Western countries as well as in those reformist communist parties which decided to participate in “democratic elections”). This end also marked the beginning of the contemporary ideological canon of neo-liberalism.

The perception of SFRY has therefore shifted from almost a role model for achieving promising forms of social justice and economic prosperity, to a failed and to be forgotten experiment irrelevant for contemporary economical and political currents. Contemporary reflections on SFRY mostly range from a nostalgic leftist (and not only leftist!) melancholy to a full-blown anti-communist dismissal. The latter is characteristic of dominant political and academic discourses in almost all ex-Yugoslav “nation-states,” whereas the former has been becoming a form of the culturalisation of the Yugoslavian legacy. Even Josip Broz Tito, the central figure of SFRY, is either dismissed as a disastrous autocrat, or celebrated as some “camp” figure because of the nostalgic interest in his flamboyant image – naturally, an interest that can be very easily “merchandised” in the spirit of “cultural capitalism” and its endless process of consumerist “self-creation.”

Therefore, it seems very complicated to remain critically alert when discussing Yugoslav-type socialism and also to act in fidelity to its original revolutionary conception: the very socialist revolution as a constituent part of the unique form of Partisan anti-fascist struggle during the “National liberation war” (1941-1945). Between “restorative nostalgia” and full-blown and almost consensual dismissal, one has the imperative to develop new means to address this important political, economical and cultural model. This task is very complicated as it flows against the current, it lacks any structural, institutional and especially academic support, and there is no political will to re-think this period in any of the seven succeeding countries of SFRY (maybe only partly in Slovenia where the nostalgic currents of the culturalisation of SFRY are the strongest and are also generating new critical interests). In the period of post-war

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"reconciliation," most of these countries have economic interests for cooperation, but no interest in re-thinking the Yugoslav model almost unanimously declared as failed and buried.



"Political Practices of (Post-)Yugoslav Art" exhibition opening

As there is no interest within the university system to explore SFRY, it took a group of independent organisations (dealing with contemporary art and critical theory) to initiate a large scale project for re-thinking the "[political practices of \(post-\)Yugoslav art](#),"¹ as the title of the project explicitly states. These organisations were established during the period of the post-socialist re-organization of the cultural and artistic space and present, at the moment, the strongest cultural opposition to dominating modes of education, production and presentation in institutional practices in ex-Yugoslav space. The project was conceived and initiated by Prelom collective (Belgrade), WHW collective (Zagreb), kuda.org (Novi Sad) and SCCA/Proba (Sarajevo), and the first comprehensive public appearance of the project, the exhibition "Retrospective 01," was conceived and organized by Jelena Vesić from Prelom collective as a

specific curatorial project. The show was held by the end of 2009 in the exhibition venue of the Museum of Yugoslav History in Belgrade with considerable support from the Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade, a rare example of a "state institution" which has continuously encouraged research on cultural and artistic production in SFRY. Although presented in the form of an exhibition, this project is in fact filling an educational gap in the current situation in which the official academic system shows no interest in treating this legacy.

The project offers, first of all, an alternative to the prevailing narratives of Yugoslav art, but keeps the edifice of "Yugoslav cultural space." These narratives usually offer a simplified linear logic which can be briefly summed up in following way: after the short period of "socialist realism" when Yugoslavia was under Soviet influence, since the early 50s "official art" was marked with the notion of "socialist modernism" championing de-politicised artistic autonomy and functioning as an aspect of general social modernisation which also conditioned different aspects of "dissident art" made by those who were on the margins and who fought for more liberal social relations. In the "PPYUart" project, this linearity was broken and some prevailing art-historical notions were questioned. Instead of the idea of a dogmatic socialist realism, a new and thus far from being fully recognized aspect of "partisan art" from the liberation war was acknowledged and researched. Instead of the usually adopted notion of socialist modernism as some apolitical



"Didactic Exhibition"

and opportunistic form of official culture, the exhibition puts forward the educational and emancipatory aspects of those modernist tendencies. And finally, instead of the notion of "dissident culture" (and its "heroism" of civic suffering under some autocratic political system), the exhibition points at the appearance of critical art close to the ideas of the radical Left in the 70s. However, the project does not imply some new linear narrative, but tries to collect and present some significant and half-forgotten *events* appearing mostly on the margins of the system but also fully belonging to the system, which can thus be viewed under a different critical light beyond nostalgic phantasm and vulgar dismissal.

It seems that the overall model of the "PPYUart" show tactically draws from the example of one of the historical events presented. WHW collective's contribution to the project is a reconstruction of the "Didactic exhibition" organized in 1957 in Zagreb (and then in some other Yugoslav cities) and shows an attempt by a group of artists from Zagreb (previously associated with the neo-constructive group EXAT 51) to insert the idea of radical abstraction (based on the constructivist rather than the post-cubist tradition which was then gradually becoming a dominant academic form) in a situation where this aspect of artistic autonomy with clearly politicised undercurrents was strongly opposed both by hard-line Zhdanovite dogmatism and by the inherited bourgeois cultural expectations which managed to "survive" the revolution and

¹ Političke prakse (post)jugoslovenske umetnosti (PPYUart).

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have influenced, in a more or less concealed way, the institutional "taste" for art. The model of the "Didactic exhibition" from 1957 – almost entirely consisting of reproductions rather than original artworks which were unavailable or fully neglected institutionally like, for example, the only original Mondrian painting kept deep in the deep vaults of Belgrade's National Museum until then – is, first of all, offering a model for an exhibition not as a fetishistic sensation but as an educational case study in which works of art appear as hands-on material of cultural analysis within the sphere of public antagonism. This is exactly how the "PPYUart" exhibition is presented: not as a collection of fetishized artworks (n.b.: today some art works from socialist Yugoslavia are heavily fetishized in art collections like the Austrian Erste Bank Collection or some smaller private collections), but as a classroom for ongoing artistic and political research and debate. This "didactic" aspect is therefore not shied away from (in accordance with dominant intellectual cynicism which does not believe in any form of cognitive becoming) but openly projected on the contemporary situation. Secondly, the example of the "Didactic exhibition" shows an effort to make an intervention in the ideological space defined not only by the proverbial cultural dogmatism of the communist rule, but also by the entire legacy of bourgeois preferences in art (as is clarified in the telling example of the attitude of the National Museum in Belgrade toward its Mondrian painting, mentioned in the excellent interview conducted by WHW with artist Ivan Picelj, one of the organizers of the 1957 "Didactic exhibition").



"How to think partisan art?"

The latter is one of the causes of the surprisingly limited consideration given to "partisan art." That is why the project "How to think partisan art?" (by the Slovenian researchers Miklavž Komelj, Lidija Radojević, Tanja Velagić and Jože Barši) makes an important rediscovery. But more than that, this project carries significant weight for contemporary debates because it focuses on discovering the new coordinates of art in the process of shaping a "collective revolutionary subjectivity" as a breaking point for "creating the empty space for the still non-existent," and thus it may be seen as a starting point for a critical reflection on contemporary art. Therefore the case of "partisan art" (here mostly presented from Slovenian archives and including primarily partisan poems, but also

various visual material consisting of drawings, designs for pamphlets and other printed material, even manuals for using bombs and weapons) offers an event of the awakening of the new autonomy of art which is not identitarian; neither vulgarly instrumentalised nor belonging to the notion of "absolute art," but as a "thematization of the unbearable tension within which this new autonomy heroically defied its own impossibility.



"Partisan Songspiel"

The exhibition also includes some contemporary art projects which reflect on the historical events presented in opposition to the dominance of neo-liberal and nationalist ideologies. Such is the work "Partisan Songspiel" [Belgrade Story] by the Russian collective Chto delat? which juxtaposes the universalist legacy of the partisan struggle with contemporary identitarian politics, i.e. with the impossibility of devising a coherent resistance to the dominating ideology when this resistance is splintered into the unrelated interests of certain identitarian groups. On the one side we have a choir of partisans (resembling the common way the partisan struggle was culturalized in the socialist period), and on the other a myriad of contemporary characters of oppressors (the liberal politician, the nationalist politician, the business tycoon, the war

profiteer, etc.) and the oppressed (a Roma/Gypsy, a lesbian, a war veteran and a worker). In a Brechtian manner, each of them utters their own social "agenda," and in their relation to the dead partisans in the choir a certain re-gathering of these fragments is instigated. Therefore, this work is an intervention in the struggle for new universalism in emancipatory politics, outside of the particularistic interests of fragmented social groups. Yet, this work also presents an open dilemma related to identifying certain cultural identity groups (Lesbian, Roma...) with the principal identity of the *worker*, the figure which has traditionally been the essential revolutionary subject. The figure of the worker has been culturalized in the liberal universe, however, this figure still cannot simply become yet another cultural identity (as, simply, a Roma

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or a homosexual can also be workers). Hence this work poses many relevant questions and this is its immediate effect.



"Retired form"

There are other contemporary works included in the exhibition. A film by David Maljković ("Retired form") focuses on a sculpture by Vojin Bakić (erected in the Memorial Park in Zagreb in 1968) dedicated to the victims of World War 2. With a film camera, Maljković investigates the abstract form of the sculpture but never fully reveals it, and attempts to re-establish some communication with it. This work relates to another historical unit of the exhibition, the project on Vojin Bakić by WHW. Bakić may be seen as an "official artist" of the socialist period whose sculptures were regularly commissioned, but at the same time the quality of his work and his understanding of the relationship between art and ideology is exceptional and his role illustrates, as WHW put it, "the ideal of socialism that was more progressive than that of the bureaucratic power apparatus." This project also reflects on the anti-communist and nationalist denial of the artist in contemporary Croatia: some of Bakić's major works were demolished during the 90s war and they are now either neglected or seen solely as examples of individual work aiming for artistic autonomy against some dogmatic party line. What the case of Bakić shows is the figure of an autonomous artist (communist-modernist) who was truthful to the event of the socialist revolution and whose work cannot be seen as merely instrumentalised by some official party line.



"Vojin Bakić"

Another recent artistic project reflects on – by means of repetition, anonymity and re-articulation – one of the first examples of "new artistic practice" in the late 60s: the event called "Red Peristyle," an anonymous intervention in the famous Roman site in Split in 1967. In 1997, Igor Grubić repeats the whole intervention by only replacing the red colour with which the site was painted in the original intervention with black. Grubić's intervention was not



"Black Peristyle"

"clandestine" but exposed, exploiting the contemporary recklessness towards the public. The artist presented himself as an "authorised" person making some repairs on the site, although he openly placed a placard on the neighbouring shop window saying: "In the honour of the Red Peristyle group 30 years after. A peristyle, like a magic mirror, reflects the state of social reality." In accordance with his notion of "individual collectivism," Grubić affiliates his work with the practice of artistic collectivism of which the Red Peristyle group is an example, and which is treated along other examples in

another historical unit of the show: "Removed from the crowd" (associations outside the programmatic collectivities in the art of the 60s and 70s in the Socialist Republic of Croatia) by DeLVe collective members Ivana Bago and Antonia Majača.

Other presented projects reflect different aspects of "new artistic practices" from the late 60s to the early 80s. Prelom collective's research "The case of the Student Cultural Centre in the 1970s," is an exhibition not of works of art produced in this Centre in Belgrade in that period (works by noted artists like Raša Todosijević, Marina Abramović, Neša Paripović, Zoran Popović, Goran Djordjević and the others), but of different documents, statements, photographs and press clippings which disclose the institutional invention of the SKC in the post-1968 climate. A quintessential video titled *Kino beleške* by Lutz Becker is also included in the display and it shows most of the protagonists of this epoch and their artistic/political attitudes. The project sheds light on the first example of the institutionalisation of "alternative culture" and all the ideological tensions of "left dissidence" in a socialist country. A contemporary mural by Darinka Pop Mitić is linked to this project. It is a remake of the mural "Solidarity of the Yugoslav people with the people of Latin America" painted on the outer wall of SKC in 1976. The work by Pop Mitić is about

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the muddled ideological relationship between the "inside" of SKC as a site of a conceptual art scene, and its "outside" which had a clearly official propaganda aim.



Photograph taken in the SKC in 1972



"The case of the Student Cultural Centre in the 1970s"



"Kino beleške"



A remake of the mural "Solidarity of the Yugoslav people with the people of Latin America" painted on the outer wall of SKC in 1976. by Darinka Pođ

The project by the kuda.org association titled "The Continuous Art Class – The Novi Sad Neo Avant-garde of the 60s and 70s" investigates this unique local example through its half-visibility and cultural marginality which have major consequences for the political genealogy of contemporary art. On the other side, the project "As soon as I open my eyes I see a film – Experiments in Yugoslav art in the '60s and '70s" by Ana Janevski, explores the production of amateur cinema clubs in Zagreb, Belgrade and Split, and in general the role of "amateurism" in shaping anti-art and anti-conformity attitudes. Finally, "TV Gallery" is a project which explores the final outcome of "new artistic practices" in the early 80s when, for the first time, a television program on this kind of art was initiated on Belgrade television by Dunja Blažević. Blažević is a person whose work coincides with the periods traversed by this project: first as the initiator and first curator of the Gallery of Students' Cultural Centre in the early 70s, then as the editor of the program "TV Gallery" in the early 80s, and today as one of the partners of the project "PPYUart" representing the Sarajevo SCCA/pro.ba.

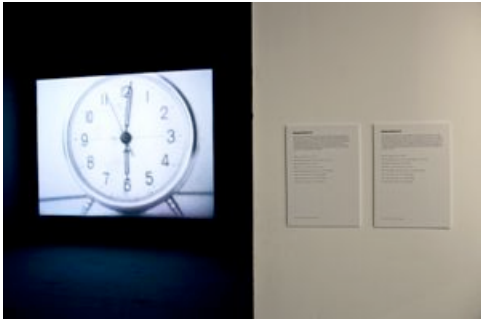
All of these projects are historical in their research dimension but contemporary in the issues they put forward: the contemporary invisibility of some relevant examples of radical art in the local context; the lack of interest in the educational system in these examples and new interventions independently filling this lack; the ideological implications of the distinction between professionalism and amateurism; the lack of any interest in today's media in radical art practices, past or contemporary; and in general, the fading of the educational component of television which was rather prominent in SFRY as one of the aspects of the general strategy of modernisation.

Instead of opting for a historical art exhibition (with all its institutional/administrational "standards" and much higher budgets), the authors of this project structured a documentary exhibition as a collaborative tactical form. The project is based on independent self-organization and departs from a concrete guiding task in a situation where a general dismissal of the artistic legacy at stake causes institutional disinterestedness. Opposing this, the project marks a joint effort to take over the education and research roles for which educational institutions should be responsible. By taking this responsibility, and a burden of investigating controversial topics, this project offers an alternative to the culturalization and fetishization of the Yugoslav art of the socialist period, which may soon be half-jokingly called "The Erste Bank History of Yugoslav Art." This is a process where powerful institutions are capitalizing upon the institutional crisis in the ex-Yugoslav territory and spreading new forms of cultural hegemony on the basis of old geo-political divisions.

As is clearly stated in relation to another work shown at "PPYUart," the video *Journal no.1* by Hito Steyerl, the dominant form of critique of cultural institutions gains a reactionary character – the nationalist critique views them as not grounded in some idea of an "indigenous" culture, whereas the neo-liberal critique diminishes the role of those institutions which are seen as not capable of adapting to the requirements of the market. Therefore, this project does not fall into the trap of a naïve leftist institutional critique, but by working outside of the institutional system and also by taking over the responsibility of educational and cultural institutions, it negotiates new forms of "overground"

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self-organization and critical collaboration which may create an affirmative alternative.



"As soon as I open my eyes I see a film - Experiments in Yugoslav art in the 1960s and 1970s"

Neo-liberalism is not about strengthening the institutional sphere, neither can the opposition to the contemporary *laissez-faire* culture be based on an assault on such a crumbling institutional system. Neo-liberalism and its anti-globalist opposition are merely two sides of the same coin, dependent on each other. The weakening of institutions is one of the main goals of the neo-liberal fragmentation and privatization of public sphere, as well as the fragmented and de-universalized world of the anti-establishment. Institutions have simply become empty shells, like empty office buildings have become stale symbols of neo-liberal economy. So, any response to this situation should not be about demolishing institutions: rather it should be about intellectually and politically "squatting" them or forming new clusters loosely attached to their empty shells, like mud and straw houses around old Roman fortresses in medieval times. Such independent organizations and alliances may fill the educational



"The Continuous Art Class - The Novi Sad Neo Avant-garde of the 60s and 1970s"

vacuum caused by the neo-liberal social collapse only insofar as they have pretensions to become symbolically stronger than institutions around which (or within which) they operate.



"TV Gallery"