

Four acts and the pair of socks

Vladimir Jerić

Let's start with a little quiz.

Why would a politician open an exhibition?

- A. Because he thinks he paid for it.
- A. Because he thinks he gains from it.
- A. Because he can.

And, the correct answer is... A!

"Yes, we can" maybe could have been the preferred position of Bojan Kostreš, at the time the President of the Assembly of the Autonomous Serbian Province of Vojvodina, when deciding to personally open in Novi Sad, the capital of this northern Serbian province, the exhibition of young artists from Pristina (Kosovo), titled "Exception." Maybe he was invited to do so by the organisers and producers of the show - as far as I know, it is perfectly possible, and here I have in mind particularly the director of the Museum of Contemporary Art of Vojvodina, Živko Grozdanić Gera, and his apparent belief in engineering public 'scandals' and 'upsets' as a publicity tool for different projects. Or maybe Mr Kostreš decided for himself or was consulted or instructed that this is something to be done; but it does not really matter to what is of interest here. It is the very fact that he did it, along with the (quite) predictable consequences... Being an active local politician he must have known that on this occasion he could not represent himself and his personal political convictions, or his taste in contemporary art, he could not even represent (in any but the strictly bureaucratic sense) the Assembly of Vojvodina (being its current president), as the Assembly was being torn apart at the time by fights between opposing political blocks, and (as always) was pretty close to becoming dysfunctional; so it could be only his political party (LSV – League of Social Democrats of Vojvodina) and its biggest strategic ally, the Democratic Party (DS), one 'concrete' political block, that he could possibly stand for when opening this exhibition. Considering the timing, all of this happened in January 2008, in the midst of the (as usually) quite desperate and 'dirty' electoral campaign, in between the first (undecided) and the second (at the time perceived as very uncertain regarding its outcome) ballot of voting for the president of Serbia. The "Pro-EU" political block Kostreš represented here was faced in the previous round with an almost completely equal (hence the 'second ballot') number of votes for the nationalistic right-wing political block, heralded by the Radical Party. And the 'renegade province' of Kosovo, through its current 'representatives' (of whom there is no reason to think they are any 'better' or 'worse' or more or less 'legitimate' than the average Serbian politicians, or the majority of any politicians for that matter), had just announced that it was about to declare 'independence' in two weeks time. The media were already programming that 'Kosovo is Serbia' - some issuing calls to arms again, as they did so many times in the recent past, some already cursing the 100th generation of the offspring of any Serbian politician who even thinks of recognizing Kosovo, and the vast majority exploring in a very creative manner all the different ways you can call someone 'a traitor.' ..



Face behind the face – presidential candidates Tomislav Nikolić (SRS, nationalistic block, upper corner) and Boris Tadić (DS, pro-EU block, lower corner)



The media campaign

The very word 'Kosovo,' representing the symbolic (and only possibly factual) 'cause' for the NATO "air campaign" (read: the bombing of Serbia on a daily basis for a period of three months) just 9 years ago, proved to be the most successful detonator of national sentiment around here for ages. Now, obviously, 'the situation' was charged, on a countdown to inevitable detonation... This kind of social (dis)balance had its ups and downs, but in this period it seemed that critical mass was almost there and that anything connected with this issue, however 'tiny' or 'marginal,' may trigger the chain reaction.

We know now that 'the unspeakable' happened, and that the enactment of the independence of Kosovo was announced some weeks later, on February 17th. Just to give a brief insight into the media situation surrounding the issue, here are the news headlines as archived by B92.net for [this date](#), as they are paradigmatic of the whole media sphere during the period:

"Over 60 injured, Slovenian embassy ransacked - at least 30 policemen and 30 civilians were injured as protesters demonstrated against U.S. and EU Kosovo policy.

Serbia annuls Kosovo independence declaration - PM Vojislav Koštunica addressed the nation today as ethnic Albanians unilaterally declared Kosovo's independence.

Ethnic Albanians declare Kosovo's independence - ethnic Albanians have today at 15:00 CET unilaterally declared independence of the Serbian province of Kosovo.

U.S. takes note, Russia wants declaration scrapped - the United States took note of the unilateral declaration of independence by Kosovo's Albanians.

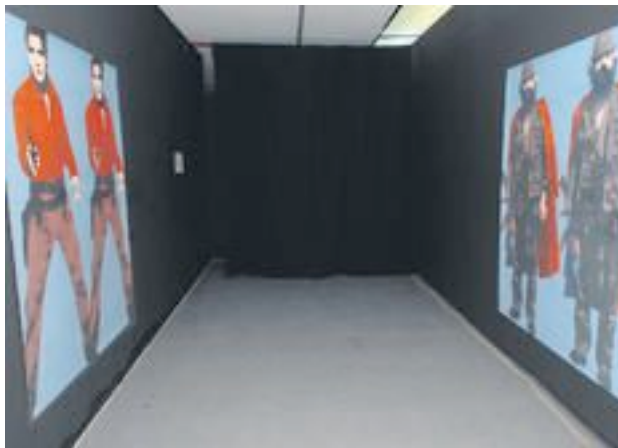
UN SC meets tomorrow in emergency session - the United Nations Security Council will hold emergency Kosovo session tomorrow.

No violence in Kosovo, says Bush - U.S. President George Bush says he will work with his allies to avoid violence in Kosovo.

Albania, Saudi Arabia first to recognize Kosovo? Beta News Agency says an analysis shows Kosovo's unilateral declaration will first be recognized by some Islamic countries.

Czech lawmakers ask intl. community to support Serbia - a group of Czech lawmakers today reacted to the announced unilateral declaration of Kosovo's independence.

U.S. analysts paint grim, bright Kosovo picture - Kosovo's declaration of independence will deteriorate the stability of the Balkans, John Bolton says."



Face to face – a work by Dren Maliqi exhibited in Novi Sad

The media campaign 2

But, let us go back to the period several weeks before all this happened, and to the Novi Sad opening of the exhibition of young artists from Pristine. Regardless of whether he was invited or instructed to open the exhibition, if he was aware of his own position, the 'sensitivity' of 'the situation' and the possible consequences, why would Bojan Kostreš do it? Whatever the possible reasons for Kostreš to open the exhibition, there is a clear advantage, or self-interest, for himself or his political block, which is connected to the act. Not to enter into an elaboration of each possibility, be it the verification of investment (after all, MCAV is funded from the state and province's budget), the advertising of certain values (it is so EUropean to do it, right?) or demonstrating the strength of the political block he represents (whatever the right-wing opposition says, just look at us - 'yes, we can'), his involvement would not happen if a clear interest of some kind was not outlined.

Which leads to what appears to be the complementary question: why was it in the interests of the 'authors,' producers and organisers of the exhibition, for this (or any other) politician to open the show?



Let the games begin



Let the games begin 2 – it says: Kosovo is Serbia: for the cross of honour and the freedom of gold. The sword is pierced through the emblem of [KLA](#).

Here comes the moment to (once again) discuss what happened on the evening of 7th of February 2008 in the Kontekst gallery and the streets around, the evening which will be remembered by the unsuccessful attempt to open the exhibition 'Exception: YKA' in Belgrade, and by the deliberate destruction of one specific artwork. Actually, this story could be rather short – it may even fit into a single sentence, like: "after the Novi Sad part, this exhibition was supposed to open in Belgrade; but a fascist lynch-mob disrupted the attempt, destroyed the one work considered to be the most provocative, and the rest of the exhibition was packed up and removed, never to be opened again." And, more or less, all these 'facts' would be 'correct.' But here we are not only interested in exactly what happened – this information would not mean much and there would not be much use to it if we do not try to understand why it happened, and what constellation of powers brought this event into being...

What I am about to offer here is one personal account. You can maybe consider it as, for what it

is, a story. Not what is often called a critique or comment or, in the word mostly used nowadays, 'the text,' but really - the story...

After numerous re-tellings and interpretations, this particular story became the commonplace of contemporary art history for some local social circles, namely those involved with 'critical art' or 'civil society activism,' while the vast majority of other social circles on the very same locale couldn't care less; for those involved in it, this story became one of fascism and violence, or the one about the absence of the rule of law and of denying the institution of the autonomy of art. For the rest of society, those who just followed the headlines of the period, it flashed briefly as a piece of news, never to re-emerge again. Many would claim the situation is self-explanatory – pictures of rallies and demonstrations, Kosovo celebrating independence, unrest and looting on Belgrade streets, trashing and burning of shops and foreign embassies, politicians trembling about possible coalitions after the elections and similar imagery was beaming out 24/7 from all the papers and screens available. One modest exhibition in an independent gallery, however unusual and provoking it may have been at the time and however paradigmatic its outcome may have been for the situation on a wider social scale, couldn't survive in the media for more than a few days.

I was one of those who decided to support the exhibition, without entering into too much details about its conception and articulation, and however flawed I may find it in certain aspects to be; one of the obvious flaws of this way of representing is the matter of identification within the framework of 'the politics of identity,' where it was not possible for the Prishtina artists to escape the identification with 'being Albanians' and therefore 'separatists,' while the audience had only but two choices: you are coming to this exhibition to either support 'the Albanian cause,' or 'to defend the integrity of Serbian territory.'.. But, after all, the exhibition was made by a certain 'professional' circle of friends and acquaintances for more-or-less the members and supporters of this same circle, and the 'provocativeness' surrounding it may only help to give the show some more focus of public attention and some additional media space, which is usually, considering contemporary critical art, right there below zero. Yes, I did expect a strong reaction from different right-wing youth sects and hooligan gangs, and the activity on fascist forums and web sites indicated that the ultra-nationalistic block will once again instrumentalize the usual crowd of violent football supporters and fans of war criminals and famous gangsters from the recent past, so I was prepared for a very tense atmosphere and significant police presence; well then, around here we got used to 'rough' conditions of working in public - the exhibition was opened in Novi Sad, and somehow survived, so the similar could be expected in Belgrade - or so I thought.

But, I never made it to the actual 'opening.' For the chronology of the event from the perspective of where Jelena and I were at certain moments of the evening and what we could see or hear, you may read [here](#), in the blogpost we wrote right after everything happened. Also, from there you can follow some links which could help a foreign reader to be introduced to certain characters and insignia which were part of this public performance. Once I eventually made it to the gallery, navigating around the police cordons, different raging gangs and other 'obstacles,' I conducted my own little forensic investigation and, based on that, constructed the following drama, involving three actors and a pair of Walter Benjamin's socks. So now we start with the script...



[Obraz](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wVC25afxpkU) supporters trying to reach Kontekst gallery in front of police cordon
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wVC25afxpkU>

Act two



The image of Adem Jashari, as it appears in the work of Dren Maliqi

The actors in this play appeared as 'icons' - they came embedded in their own images. Two of them were standing inside the gallery, one recognisable as [Adem Jashari](#) and the other as [Elvis Presley](#), the first in his combat/tribal uniform, casually holding an automatic rifle, and the latter as represented at the time by Andy Warhol, dressed as a cowboy, pulling out a gun and aiming at whoever is looking. These two came visiting as part of the work "Face to face" by Dren Maliqi. The third 'icon' was brought outside the gallery to confront Jashari - it was [Legija](#), the famous war and civilian criminal, who was eventually found guilty and is serving a prison sentence for the assassination of the then Serbian prime minister Zoran Đinđić. His life-size image was brought by the usual lynch mob of fascists and ultra-nationalists to defend them from what they perceived as the "armed invasion" of the image of Jashari - no

doubt they really believed that the image of this dead Albanian rebel, whose known history tells that he was not much more different than Legija in terms of his ruthlessness, use of violence and conducting of cold-blooded murders, was the 'Jashari himself,' who rose from the grave to haunt 'the Serbs' once again. Apparently for them this horror of dealing with Kosovo insurgency was happening in the very center of Belgrade this time, not in some remote hills down south - the place they pathetically recognise as 'the holy land of Kosovo,' but which most of them never actually seen for themselves, so for them it exists only in the space of contemporary mythology - behind TV screens and on the pages of the yellow press. Therefore they brought a life-size image of Legija, dressed in his military uniform, sprinkled with medals and decorations, believing that this powerful criminal/war hero himself will lead the 'exorcism campaign' and chase the menace out, both from the gallery and from 'our society' at large. They might have believed that the image of the dead Adem Jashari was there to herald an attempt to invade Serbia, announced by the Kosovo politicians intended aim to formally claim independence for their province. The

'situation' couldn't be more serious: Serbia is under siege, and the first enemy commando units have just started to position themselves in, no less, the very heart of Belgrade. They sent the best they got - we need to answer by mobilizing our finest... So, send for Legija!

Act three



The picture of Legija facing the gallery

As for the dispositions within this drama, the starting positions of these actors-images were as follows: Jashari and Elvis standing in the gallery facing each other and Legija on the street outside, facing towards the gallery. The dialogue between the images in the gallery, one presenting what is among some, quite possibly the majority of Kosovo Albanians, dubiously perceived as the hero of the armed liberation struggle, and the other presenting fast-paced consumerism and the smoke screen of nihilism of contemporary capitalism, was very tense. They were facing each other,

Elvis pulled out the gun first and had an obvious advantage over the still unaware and unprepared Jashari, so the outcome implied is obvious - Jashari goes down. Maybe he is 'down' already, if we take the Warhollesque style of rendering the images as an indicator of 'whose aesthetics/politics rule' - Jashari, rendered like this, goes straight to t-shirts and coffee mugs and postcards and whatnot, becoming the commodified image for mass consumption of pop-nationalism, with hysterical consumerism embedded - so not only is he down and out as such, but his remains, his image, only serve to further feed the dominance of 'the principle of Elvis.' Whatever search and struggle for 'distinctiveness' and 'identity' Kosovo Albanians have tried to achieve, presented in this unfortunate but (apparently) unavoidable image of Jashari, it is already doomed to fail and to become part of the 'One world, one dream' of consumerist culture and politics as conceived by Hollywood or 'Viva Las Vegas.'..

Act one

If this was the intended problematic of Dren Maliqi when he contemplated the work in Prishtine, the one of capitalism and cultural hegemony and contemporary societies-in-transition and their dilemmas and positions, then it could be read as such in all places but Serbia - this is where this image would mean something else. It is only in Serbia that Jashari could overshadow Elvis in their mutual confrontation, and come out as a temporary winner, as the one whose 'meaning' weights more. But it was only in Serbia that his 'meaning' could be different from what Maliqi could have possibly meant by facing the two - here, Elvis had to resort to the tactics of acting from 'behind,' appearing in the local context as a silent and almost invisible escort to Jashari, but arranging in advance that Legija will wait in ambush, so that Jashari will be taken in the cross-fire at the very spot. But, how Elvis did it? What is this strange alliance between Elvis and Legija, and how did it come into being? Did he call Legija in advance, saying: "Listen, Elvis here. I know you don't really like me and that you prefer some local [chetniks](#) or at least that Stallone guy as your pop icons; but never mind that now,. (now singing in his deep and smooth voice:) *Soon I'll be visiting with the one you really hate, and I can deliver him to you on a plate, so here's the place and the date...* (now, getting serious again:) I'll keep this Jashari guy entertained and watching at me, so you can sneak in from the back and do your thing. Just pretend I am not there and that I never called, OK?" Here we can imagine Legija listening with a grin on his face, but, being experienced in the business as he is, asking, just in case: "What do I owe you for this?," and Elvis answering: "Nothing. My pleasure. Just forget that I called," and then hanging up.



Opening & closing within three minutes: happenings inside the gallery
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jRSzUSwcVcQ>

If we read the images so that they tell us that Jashari was not aware of what Elvis was plotting from the very beginning, so that he was caught by surprise by Elvis pulling out the gun first, then in a similar manner Jashari couldn't be less prepared to face Legija on Legija's own terrain - after all, in this story he had his eye on Elvis, trying to understand this threatening gun-pulling move by what he thought was his ally. So we could conclude that only in Serbia Jashari may be tricked into believing that it is he, and not Elvis, who is of significance here, just to find himself in the very next moment under ferocious attack by Legija, from behind, with Elvis laughing in the 'audience.'. In this play, it seems that Jashari had no choice really, but to go down - the very nature of his static and two-dimensional image made him look in just one direction at the time - towards Elvis. He could not do anything against Legija at his back; if he turned to face Legija, he would expose his back to Elvis and his cocked gun...

It seems that Dren Maliqi had in mind just one story, the one of dialogue (or rather a two-fold dramatic monologue) between Jashari and Presley, between the new subjected subjectivities whose production is being outsourced to Prishtine, and the 'headquarters,' the 'source code' of it; that is, the one about the (im)possibilities of radically new subjectivities within the hyper-capitalism of the global scale of today, and about 'the market of identities' as the borders of the contemporary 'world-as-we-know-it.' But to this other, entirely different story, involving Legija in ambush, the images of Jashari accompanied by the stealth presence of Elvis, were invited by the organisers and producers of the show. To them, and to Maliqi at the end, it should have been obvious that it is precisely in Serbia that the historical/materialistic aspects of the work and the 'original' position of the author would be rendered in a different meaning, the one in which the work questions the idea of a nation, and not a class, and where the target of the critique is not in the headquarters of a chain store or a bank or at the other side of a TV screen, but behind the closest national border. They should have known that Elvis had Legija's number set on fast dial in his comprehensive phonebook. Allow me for some therapeutical paranoia here: sometimes it seems that Elvis has a phonebook with all the numbers out there, even the ones which we think do not have any subscribers yet...



Demolition of the work *Face to Face* by Dren Maliqi, Kontekst Gallery, 7th of February 2008.



This kind of 'misreading' could have been avoided only if the exhibition was not realized in the form of national cultural representation, as it was articulated; if that was not the case, the intended position of Jashari's image would not so easily become the victim of Presley's plot. But within this 'national selection' scenario, the only one who could benefit was Elvis, and so it happened: the quick outcome of this staged encounter of the three was that Jashari was left lying on the floor, torn to pieces by Legijas people, and that Legija himself was easily handled and chased away by the police, exactly like the convict he is. He once had his moment in which this kind of disgrace would have been unimaginable, but now 'the real bosses' see no purpose in having him around, except for such low-level dirty jobs such as street mobbing. And just a short remark here: we shouldn't assume that in this text it is Jashari who is of concern to us at all, and that in this script the writer sees him as 'the victim' of some kind; what is of interest here is this dialogue itself, the dialogue which renders some important relations visible, of which we always should try to learn more, even if it is only Jashari echoing in a distorted manner whatever Elvis says (like when an adult is trying to learn a difficult new foreign language). It is this dialogue which is missing now, broken and silenced by the sudden disappearance of Jashari, or any similar counterpart or twisted mirror image of Elvis – but, you know, Elvis doesn't like to be mocked with. Nor does he want his business practices to be revealed for everybody to see and discuss - his relations to Jashari or his calls to Legija is no public affair. In public, he wants to be taken seriously, at all times. He does not need nor like a spotlight on him anymore, as of today he is in the training and teaching business, like the old primadonna of the Russian ballet mentoring the new generation - his wrinkles are not for showing, really. But catching headlines and being in the spotlight is what he teaches his students to be good at. By any means necessary.

Act four



The last man standing

So, as so many times before: Elvis successfully disappeared at the beginning of the story, only to emerge as the last man standing at the end... It does remind of the story of [Walter Benjamin](#) and his childhood fascination with socks. According to his own memories (*Berlin Childhood Around 1900*), the socks in Benjamin household were put away in the closet and wrapped up in a way that little Walter always thought that they were actually a 'present,' contained in what he proclaimed to be 'the pocket.' After each careful intervention to get to the present hidden in the pocket, he had to unfold the thing, and it turned out that there was not much of a present inside, the 'pocket' itself disappeared, and the third thing suddenly emerged as 'true' - a sock. There are different interpretations of what this story actually means, including a few from Benjamin himself. The most common is the one in which he says that "It taught me that form and content, veil and what is veiled, are the same." Then, some years later, he added: "They (the present and the pocket) were one - and, to be sure, a third thing too: the sock into which they had been transformed." This may have been the reason why, in some of Benjamin's stories, there is something (like a dwarf) hiding in something else (like a ball, or automaton). In a similar manner, in what most people may have seen as 'the battle of icons,' the one between Jashari and Legija, when trying to determine what is the essence of it, and who may have won - as victory has to be the outcome of the battle - all of a sudden we discover that both Jashari and Legija vanished into thin air, and that there is only the image of Elvis, appearing 'out of nowhere' to answer on our inquiry...

But it seems that the 'sock story' doesn't end here.

The Applause



Artwork, protected by police

The same may actually have happened with the whole event around the 'Exception.' It was supposed to be *the exhibition of young artists from Prishtine*; but, eventually, there was no exhibition (it was never opened), and there were none of the artists from Prishtina around (this is a different affair altogether, which also seems very important to be analyzed, not on this occasion, though) - anyhow, what emerged as 'existing' at the end was RUK!, an ad-hoc initiative of self-proclaimed 'workers in culture' of Belgrade's contemporary critical art scene (and, for the record, of which I was a sort of the auxiliary part of). RUK! felt that the attack on the autonomy of the institution of art from the side of fascists and ultra-nationalists had to be countered by the organized response of the united members of what is perceived as 'the field of culture.' And, truly enough, there was no attempt, not even a symbolic one, to 'protect' the exhibition and its producers by any formal institution - the police did the legal minimum of keeping 'the situation' under control, in a way they have seen 'appropriate.' Their tactics point to the possibility that they allowed for 'controlled detonation' through allowing the destruction of Maliqis work to happen inside the gallery, in order to prevent a wider escalation of such an overcharged atmosphere onto the streets outside. This clearly demonstrates that they related to the works in the gallery as to a 'non-art,' denying themselves their own policing function, which in this discourse would be to protect the art by all means, both in a symbolical and historical/material sense. But, in this order of things, the first instance has to be the place from where the canonization is being conducted; an instance of power, walking around and pointing the finger at whatever, saying "This is art. And this. This is not. This is also not..." Police walk behind, taking notes, making lists of orders, and then delegating forces around the things marked as 'art,' so as to police them. Regarding this particular event, the very place from where such canonization should arrive was perceived as powerless, or wrong, or plainly 'outside the system'; so the police decided on their own that it is not 'the art' but 'public order' which they are in charge of protecting in this case - in other words, the police refused to take down notes in which the image of Jashari, or the other images and objects encompassed by this exhibition, could be designated as 'art.' This denial of function continued with the police insisting that the exhibition can not be opened and that the rest of the 'objects' should be removed from the space as soon as possible, as they can not 'guarantee the safety' of the organisers, visitors and works - a decision really, to which the Kontekst gallery had to comply with. Again, the police refused to accept that this event could be canonized into 'the exhibition,' and that those 'things' could be verified as 'art.' So RUK! decided that through their wider joint initiative, involving some 'more established' and perceived-as-powerful 'workers in culture,' another and more successful attempt should be made towards achieving the position of power necessary to execute this canonization.



Face to face, back to back

But, the rest of the official 'institutions' did not bother to fulfill even their 'functional minimum,' not even in at least a form of communiqué, a statement, a condemnation of violence and/or a call for the exhibition to be open and accessible - which may look odd, as the unofficial leadership of RUK! itself consisted of people who were in prominent positions at the Ministry of Culture, the National Museum of Contemporary Art, the University, powerful NGO's... Worth noting: all those high-profile public figures decided that they will not act from the position of their official functions, but from the position of their personal names. This is, again, something which seems to be very important to keep in mind and to analyze further in attempt to understand both the previous social constellation, the conditions of the emergence and the consequences of RUK!'s actions. Also, there is the moment of 'self-marginalization,' which is characteristic of not only this particular initiative, but of many others; however, on this occasion we will not explore that route. To continue: what followed, whatever RUK! contemplated at its several subsequent (and quite vivid) joint meetings and in numerous smaller-group/private exchanges, was a complete institutional silence. Yes there was a newspaper issued and the public conference organized at the end, but the final outcome clearly demonstrated that this group of people had no power to canonize what was once already rejected as 'a work of art.' This seemed to come as a bit of a surprise for some of the actors involved, as it appeared that they believed that their personal names had more power in the 'public discourse' on all things art; and there may be certain reasons for why they might have believed so, but which is a topic of separate analysis. Of course, it is so easy to be analytical post-festum, from the distance of historical perspective, once 'everything is over' - to be analytical in contemporaneity of the event is where the [kung-fu](#) is...



"The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism. One reason why Fascism has a chance is that in the name of progress its opponents treat it as a historical norm. The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are 'still' possible in the twentieth century is not philosophical. This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge - unless it is the knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable."

Walter Benjamin: *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (Spring 1940)

Translation by Harry Zohn (wbenjamin.org)