

Politics of Display and Troubles With National Representation in Contemporary Art

Jelena Vesić

The idea of the exhibition *Exception – Young Artists from Prishtine*, the network of collaborations surrounding it, and the relation between the curatorial idea and the artworks, is not a straightforwardly simple matter as it may seem from what is so far being said about it. Here I refer especially to the ‘case’ of its violent closing. One of the main motives for this exhibition to happen maybe lies in the local interest of Belgrade’s contemporary art circles in the young and vibrant Kosovo art scene, which “officially” emerged after the year 2000. Another interesting aspect is that this sudden ‘flourishing’ of local contemporary art scenes in “Western Balkans” was and still is, in most of the cases, connected to the significant influx of money from the various foreign foundations.

This was precisely the case in the second part of the 1990s with the *Soros Fund for an Open Society*, when the Center for Contemporary Art in Belgrade was established. Although there was, approximately at the same time, a pretty developed contemporary art scene in Kosovo, the appearance on the international scene of the youngest generation of Kosovo artists had to wait until the year 2000 and owed its international visibility, almost exclusively, to the programs of the *Kulturstiftung des Bundes* and, especially, the *Missing Identity project*¹. Certainly, this happens always in relation to a wider geo-political agenda, which is in this case the official assignment of culture to become a part of the processes of “democratization” and “normalization” in the so-called post-conflictual societies. However, such geo-political constraints did not mean that the situation could not be used for other more progressive and emancipatory goals (as both the cases of the Belgrade and Prishtine scenes clearly show in a number of ways).

Also, simultaneously with the activities of the aforementioned foundations, a certain local interest in the new Kosovo art scene started to arise in Belgrade art circles. This probably has to do with a certain kind of nostalgia for something that is seen nowadays as non-existing, or as having faded away – namely, a virile and potent contemporary art scene, one which could generate not only a substantial quantity of art production, but also one which is perceived as politically engaged, humorous, as well as fairly organized and networked both locally and internationally. This nostalgia is directed, seemingly paradoxically, towards the second half of the 1990s, and, especially, to the activities of Belgrade’s [Soros] Center for Contemporary Art.² The dominant perspective within those circles appears to be that after the Yugoslav Biennial of Young Artists in 2004³ – as the last project of the CCA – the Belgrade contemporary art scene died out or, at least, dissipated in various directions.

¹ According to the word by organizers – *Contemporary Art Institute EXIT*, Peja, in cooperation with the *Laboratory for Visual Arts* and the *Center for Humanistic Studies Gani Bobi*, Kosovo – *Missing Identity* queries the attempts to establish a unified national identity and propagates the protection of difference. The project also seeks to create an artistic reality of what is experienced as absent in Kosovo: cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity. Cf: http://www.projekt-relations.de/en/explore/missing_identity/index.php

² *Centre for Contemporary Art - Belgrade* was established in 1994 with the aim to promote and support the production of arts&culture in Serbia and Balkans by organizing exhibitions, conferences, presentations, screenings and lectures. The Centre for Contemporary Art succeeded in the creation of the new cultural community and in promoting a new generation of artists, mostly through establishing the institution of “annual exhibitions” which often included budgets for new art production. However, the art production in Serbia between 1994 and 1999 rarely took a political direction, and mostly resigned in what is referred to as *active escapism* – the option bordering with political conformism and social apathy chosen by numerous social and cultural subjects who, faced with a catastrophic social environment, resolved the imposed dilemma of “withdrawal or participation?” by retreating to “inner habitats” [more about *active escapism* in: *Art in Yugoslavia 1992-1995*, Centre for Contemporary Art, Belgrade, 1996 and *On Normality: Art in Serbia 1989 – 2001* - the exhibition catalogue], Mica, Belgrade 2005]. After 1999, the Center took a more concrete critical-political direction with the project of alternative education embodied in the activity of *The School for History and Theory of Images*. The work of the School produced a new community of critical artists, theorists and curators, comprising of both professors and the students, and which also led to the establishing of *Prelom – Journal for Images and Politics*, active since 2001.

³ Yugoslav Biennial of Young Artists was held in Rijeka (Croatia), but at the beginning of 1990s when war started, it was moved to Vršac (Serbia). Its main institutional function was breeding and promoting the new generations of young artists. The Biennial in 2004 under the title *Untitled (as Yet)* have, among other things, explored the idea of ‘peripheral’ biennials and their role within the art system. This was the first Yugoslav Biennial which was realized as an international exhibition and the last Yugoslav Biennial ever. The new city authorities of Vršac broke with this tradition and removed all the documentation available online along with the entire Biennial website, hosted on the city servers.

The situation from the year 2000 on, after the 'change' brought on by the October 5th events, allowed for many actors to find their way into the official cultural institutions. On the one hand, one of the epicenters became the Museum of Contemporary Art, serving the function of constructing the recent local art history and organizing big international shows. On the other hand, the majority of the art institutions have turned to a market-driven eclecticism of sellable object-art, commercial design, corporate art and cognitive entertainment – the approach taken by Remount gallery, Zvono gallery, Ozone gallery and various other art and multimedia centers. This was the context in which the Kontekst gallery started operating. One of the first activities of the new gallery was taking care of the Mangelos prize for young artists which was previously part of the program of CCA Belgrade. This meant accepting the role of an institution in charge of direct engagement with young artists and emerging art – or, in other words, this represented the symbolic continuation of the activities of the CCA. Therefore, Kontekst gallery came to the fore as *the* place for socially engaged art. But, here we can pose the question: in what way exactly is this concept different from the usual civil-democratic politicization of art, based on an idea of the representational public sphere under its negotiatory and discussional guise? Maybe it is precisely the analysis of the case of the exhibition *Exception, Young Artists from Prishtine*, opened and closed at the same day, which could point to some of the problems embedded in this cultural-political approach.

* * *

One of the central issues questioned through this exhibition is the relationship between contemporary art and national representation. The form of the exhibition was based on a certain modality of diplomacy – that is, on the visit of Kosovo artists to Novi Sad and Belgrade and the exchange with a local public interested in cultural-artistic affairs. As the curators themselves wrote, *Serbia today does not know the Albanian culture and society in Kosovo, as it was the case in the past decades [...] The project presents both women and men artists, theoreticians and people active in culture who will discuss art, culture and society in Kosovo focusing especially on artistic and cultural relations between Serbia and Kosovo.*⁴

In the colloquial speech of contemporary art, exhibitions based on national representation are usually connected with launching of new trends on to national artistic scenes (e.g. *the New French Art, the British Art Today*, etc). Although those are in fact national projects of culture organized from 'above,' supported by national funds and institutions and promoted by diplomatic cultural representatives and cultural centers (confirming thus that the representation of a national culture is an affair of the State), such projects are unquestionably not being brought in connection with notions of 'nationalism' and the 'national question.' Quite probably it could be a consequence of the acting of 'the universal language' of Western contemporary art which takes over the place of (and in advance prevents the use of) the tag of 'cultural imperialism.' As it is the common phenomena in the constellation of 20th century national states, culture was, first of all, based on exchange between the nations – as it was often the case of presenting foreign contemporary art in the socialist Yugoslavia.

Then again, nowadays, the context of cultural exchange is mostly international as presented through thematical and review-type shows of different formats and scopes. Moreover, to make an international show is today a kind of dictum of contemporary literacy in culture – an exhibition is not 'contemporary enough' if it is not an international one. Nevertheless, this umbrella of internationalism shelters the same old process that is unfolding underneath since the presence of the artists is still being primarily determined through the mechanism of national representation, especially in the cases of artists from 'the periphery.' While the universal paradigm of contemporaneity remains to be the undeniable privilege of the artists of the Western countries (whose national identity seems to be unimportant, as the funding for their participation is almost never in question), the 'periphery' on the other hand, appears as the 'otherness,' in this way

⁴ Cf. Catalogue *Odstupanje: Savremena umetnicka scena Prištine/ Exception: Contemporary Artistic scene from Prishtine*, Introduction by Vida Knežević, Kristian Lukić, Ivana Marjanović and Gordana Nikolić, page 19, http://www.kontekstgalerija.org/pdf_08/odstupanje.pdf

...serving its role of completing the multiculturalist image of the ‘peoples of the world.’



Fuck You, Sokol Beqiri, 2001

According to Rastko Močnik, identity is an ideological mechanism and as such it has its material existence above all in state regulations: *National (cultural) identity legitimises the state intervention within the field of culture and eventually justifies protectionist measures, such as quotas and alike. It is interesting that the EU has introduced a “European” quota and has been, to a certain limited extent, slowing down privatisation and commercialisation of cultures in the name of “cultural diversity,” It seems that “diversity” actually refers to “identities” as they are seen from (the side of) a more comprehensive European perspective. And yet, at a closer look, both notions seem misleading: they are a presupposition that cultures are homogenous blocks, an understanding that seems to be a kind of simplified version of the 19th century folkloristic enthusiasm promoted by nationalist intellectuals*⁵. Therefore, to understand better the background of the (unsuccessful) diplomatic activity conducted by the exhibition *Exception*, we should give a closer look to the singular developments of the Kosovo and Serbian contemporary art scene, not only in relation to the issues of cultural identity and the national state agendas, but also in relation to the wider European context.

July 1999



Albanian Flag on the Moon for the First time

Albanian Flag on the Moon Erzen Shkololli, 2005

The contemporary artists from Kosovo produced numerous artworks which, on the conceptual and representational levels, directly hosted actual ‘national questions’ present in the real-political field of both the under-construction Kosovar State and of the supra-national political

⁵ Cf. Rastko Močnik, “Identity and the arts,” *Contemporary Art and Nationalism*, ed. Minna Henriksson and Boynik Sezgin, Institute for contemporary art „Exit” / MM-Center for Humanistic Studies “Gani Bobi,” Pristine, 2007

bodies in charge of resolving the issue⁶. One of the examples is the work *Fuck You* by Sokol Beqiri (2001) which presents a group of people standing in a line from the oldest to the youngest, holding up small Albanian flags and spelling the expression 'Fuck you' by using the semaphore flag signaling system (often mistaken for 'naval signals'). Edi Muka has pointed out that "this work articulates the difficult position in which the artist finds himself – caught between nationalism on one hand and the invisibility of his people in the international political arena on the other"⁷. Another example would be Erzen Shkololli's 'comical' montage of the image of an astronaut placing the Albanian flag on the surface of the Moon (*Albanian Flag on the Moon*, 2005). This 'event' is dated to the June of 1999 – the moment in which NATO ground troops entered the territory of Kosovo, remaining stationed there ever since. Also, several artworks on this topic were produced by Albert Heta. Within the context of the Cetinje Biennial in Montenegro, he performed the tactical action of placing the Albanian flag on the building of the old Serbian Embassy in Cetinje, (*The Embassy of the Republic of Kosova*, 2004). This work was

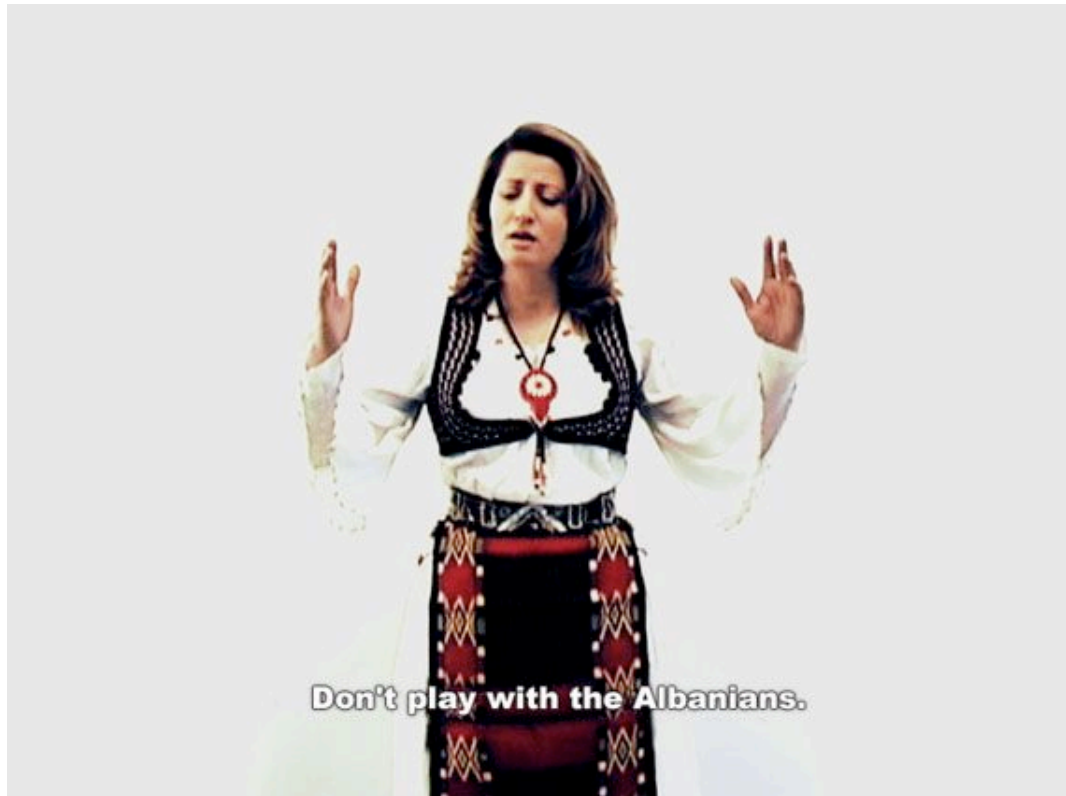


The Embassy of the Republic of Kosova, Albert Heta, 2004

censored by the citizens, media and art institutions and discussed many times in various intellectual and artistic circles in Belgrade and Prishtine, in the aftermath judged as both progressive and reactionary. Only a year later, the artist used e-flux news to promote the non-existing *Kosovar Pavilion in Venice*. In this media hack, Heta appropriates the work of Sislej Xhafa who exhibited in the Albanian pavilion, playing thus with the lack of distinction among the international art community between what would be the Albanian pavilion and the Kosovo pavilion. We can add to this group of national-identitary statements the famous work *Hey You* by Skhololli (2002) – the video in which the popular folk singer Skurte Fejza is singing the following lines: ... *Hey Europe I'm addressing you a letter | As Albanian of Old Albania | How are my sons | You know well that they are in emigration ... | Do you remember my territories? | Do you remember Albanians in one homeland ... | How did you cut off the borders! | My brothers and sisters were left outside... | You cut off the eagle in two parts ... |*

⁶ For additional information regarding this issue see: Sezgin Boynik, "Theories of Nationalism and Contemporary Art in Kosovo," *Contemporary Art and Nationalism*, ed. Minna Henriksson and Boynik Sezgin, Institute for contemporary art „Exit“ / MM-Center for Humanistic Studies "Gani Bobi," Prishtine, 2007

⁷ Cf. <http://www.culturebase.net/artist.php?1455>



Hey You, Erzen Skhololli, 2002

The Serbian, or more precisely Belgrade libertarian intellectuals, observe those national and State-building questions in contemporary Kosovo art mainly through the optics of the ‘movement for independence,’ interpreting them as a struggle for de-colonialization, or as a process of ‘liberating’ the new national states. In the framework of the dominant ideology and its binary choices (where any statement is weighted by whether it is *for* or is *against* the independence of Kosovo), the critique of those works as ‘nationalist’ seems to be entirely impossible. Any critique would be interpreted as a reflection of Serbian nationalism/patriotism, while any affirmation of it would be (at least on the local level) deemed as an act of treason.

Artists from Serbia also dealt with issues of national identity and with the project of State-building within the framework of contemporary art and in the context of post-Yugoslav crisis, but it seems that they less frequently resorted to an affirmative approach, at least within the field of so-called critical art. Raša Todosijević in his work *Gott liebt die Serben* (1989 onwards) parodies the freshly resurrected national myths of the 1990’s, identifying them precisely as a constituent part of clero-fascist politics of the ruling ideology of the Serbian state (the slogan “God Loves the Serbs” is in this work related to the image of swastika as the symbol of fascism). Another example might be the work by Milica Tomić *I am Milica Tomić [...] I am a Serb, French, Korean, German, etc.* (1998), where the notion of national identity is being examined within the corpus of post-modernist relativism and the globalization of society, within which the artistic subject is perceived as a citizen of the world. But, and despite this, the artist in her statement underlines that the basic drive behind her work is the impossibility and the rejection to speak out or pronounce clearly her nationality as a consequence of the political circumstances of nationalism, war and violence of the official Belgrade of that time.⁸

⁸ “The statement *I am Milica Tomić. I am a Serb* in the context of state policy, which produces the hallucinatory effect of a collective identity, loses the meaning of self-determination or intimate choice and becomes a ‘ticket’ into the club of the dominant ideology. The paradoxical choice to publicly deny my national and religious identity is inversely proportional to the very paradox that lies within a national identity: it is a totally artificial product, but on a personal level it is still experienced as completely natural and necessary, so every community is an imagined one, but only imagined communities are real,” Milica Tomić, Artist statement 1998, Cf. *Inside/Outside, Independent artists from F.R.Yugoslavia*, Galeria Zacheta, Warsaw, 2000, page 22



Öte yandan, 1990'lardaki Kosova mitinin Milošević döneminde ve sonrasında Sırbistan'ın milliyetçi ve faşist politikalarının sancağı halini alması, bu ulusal miti konu alan ve nihayetinde yeniden canlandırılan sanatsal temsillere duyulan ilginin canlanmasıyla sonuçlanmıştır. 1980'lerin sonunda ve 1990'ların başında Kosova miti, toplumsal birliğin yeni harcı olarak sosyalist *The Death of Murat*, Dragan Malešević Tapi, 1982

On the other hand, the myth of Kosovo during the 1990's becomes the flagship of the nationalist and fascist politics of Milošević's and post-Milošević's Serbia, resulting in renewed interest in artistic representations which thematize and consequently, revitalize this national myth. At the end of the 1980's and the beginning of the 1990's, the Kosovo myth replaced the socialist ideology of "Brotherhood and Unity" as the new cement of social cohesion. In the sphere of real-politics, it was revived on the occasion of the celebration of the 600th anniversary of the battle of Kosovo at Gazimestan in 1989, the event after which Milošević definitely grasped complete control over power. Ever since that moment, history becomes the active force in defining national roots and in the 'grounding' of national identities. The ethno-nationalistic myth of the heroic sacrifice of the Serbian people in defending the 'gates of Europe' and the Christian world from the Ottoman invasion is phantasmagoric and anti-historical, and exactly as such it appears in a large number of works situated in the official discourse of the politics of the 1990's.⁹ Some of the paradigmatic examples of this are the paintings *The Death of Murat* (1982) by Dragan Malešević Tapi and *The Battle of Kosovo* (1985) by Olja Ivanjicki.

⁹ More about the revival of the Kosovo myth in the Serbian art of nineties at: Zoran Erić, "Recycling of National Myths in Serbian Art of the Nineties," *Umelec International*, 2003

<http://www.divus.cz/umelec/en/pages/umelec.php?id=1007&roc=2003&cis=3#clanek>

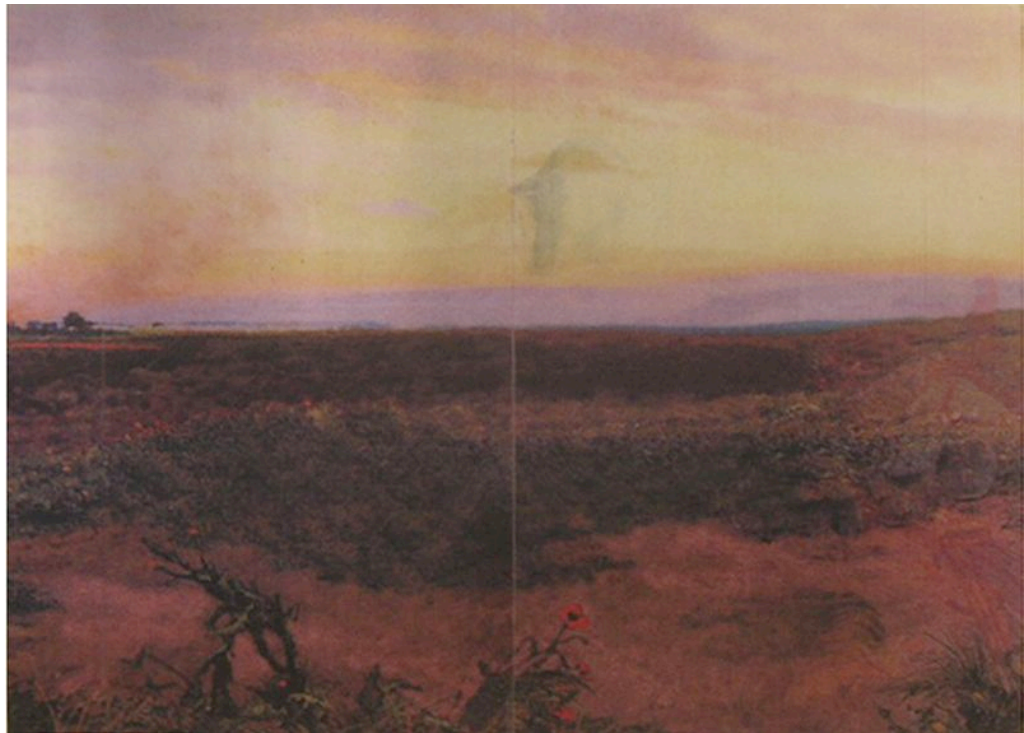


The cover of *Bijelo dugme* (unofficially known as *Kosovka djevojka*), the seventh studio album released by Yugoslav rock group *Bijelo Dugme*. Due to *Bijelo Dugme*'s usage of the famous painting by Uroš Predić for the album's cover, the most widely used name for the album is *Kosovka djevojka* (*Kosovo Maiden*), despite it officially being a self-titled album. (from Wikipedia article)

Moreover, the eclectic discourse of post-modernism uses its gravitational force to attract this representation to the field of the 'new image,' as exemplified by the work *Kosovo Maiden* by Predrag Nešković (1991) or *Final Solution* by Čedomir Vasić (1999). In both examples, it is a case of the remixing and recycling of the Kosovo myth, mediated through its academic-sentimentalistic representations from the period of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (1918-1945) – more concretely, both images refer to the painting *Kosovo Maiden* by Uroš Predić (1919) which portrays the heroes of ethnic epic poetry: the wounded but surviving knight – a "hero of Kosovo" – and a beautiful and merciful local girl, who walks the battlefield in the aftermath, nursing the wounded. Observing the digital manipulation of the image in the work of Čedomir Vasić, which erases the mythical representation of the battle, leaving the landscape (the field of Kosovo) completely deserted, we can hardly avoid the allusion to the 'ethnic cleansing' of the Serbian population in Kosovo after the NATO intervention of 1999. The fact that the landscape stares empty at the viewer after the Serbs have left is, at the same time, both the negation of the existence of the Albanian population, and the melancholic picture of the loss of territories, that is, of all that fits into the nationalist State ideology of the Republic of Serbia.



Kosovo Maiden, Predrag Nešković, 1991



Final Solution, Post Scriptum, Čedomir Vasić, 2007

Yet, the most active and most functional power of mobilization, in the political sense, we can find in the movie *The Battle of Kosovo* (1989) by Zdravko Šotra. Shot in a very short time, without any regard for the historical facts, mythological narration and cinematic culture, the basic message it communicates is the one of the inevitability of war. The protagonists of the battle are being portrayed as a kind of kamikaze-crusaders¹⁰ – they readily and without any question rush to their deaths, for the sake of defending Christian honour from the Muslim infidels, apparently with no

¹⁰ Or it can be said that they were being portrayed as a sort of ancient suicide bomber squad, in a similar manner in which the 'fundamentalists' of today are being represented: as the group of people who are underpowered in their battle against what is perceived as the 'oppressors' or 'invaders' but who decide to make up for this disadvantage by investing their own lives in the battle and using the tactics of acting 'undercover,' locating their 'reward' not in this life, but in 'the eternal one.' Another paradigmatic example is the myth of the assassination of the Ottoman sultan and chief-in-command Murat (a historical figure, Murad I), who was according to this epic stabbed by the Serbian knight Miloš Obilić (not confirmed as the historical figure according to the data available), who managed to approach Murat by pretending that he came to surrender to the sultan himself. The myth states that Obilić was slain at the very spot of the assassination and that he announced his attention to sacrifice himself for christianhood at the dinner arranged by the Serbian chief-in-command Lazar the night before, the event which resembles the Biblical myth of *The Last Supper*.

political agenda whatsoever. Through a special broadcast of this film on national television the



The Battle of Kosovo, Zdravko Šotra, 1989

evening before the NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999 started (the event which itself was promoted as 'the second battle for Kosovo') the direct political instrumentalization of this film was once again manifested (as had been the case before with its utilization in shaping public opinion in the wars in Bosnia and the oppression of the Albanian population in Kosovo). The persistent denial by the official national historiography to explore in a critical manner the question of the political causes and constellations of the 1389 battle of Kosovo contributes to the alignment of this myth to the order of greatest national taboos.

Here it is also important to pay attention to the formal transformations the Kosovo myth went through during the period of Yugoslav socialist modernism – the cultural and political project which represented the form of emancipation from the Stalinistic dictate of soc-realism, after Yugoslavia broke with Informbiro

(Cominform) in 1948¹¹. At the Sao Paulo Biennial, the Yugoslav painter Petar Lubarda exhibits his series *The Battle of Kosovo* (1953) as the example of 'high modernism' – the myth is here denationalized and subjected to the universal politics of the struggle of the oppressed against the oppressors, the weak against the strong, which in the given ideological setting could be read as 'pre-figuration' of the class struggle and the battle against fascism (that is, of the battle of Yugoslav partisans against the more powerful enemy).



The Battle of Kosovo, Petar Lubarda, 1953

¹¹ As argued by Ljiljana Blagojević, socialist modernism was built upon a double negation: on the one hand, on the repudiation of the between-the-two-world-wars modernity, e.g. functionalism and constructivism as the supposed products of capitalism and on the other, on the distance towards the Soviet model exemplified by the aesthetics of 'formalist eclecticism.' Cf. Ljiljana Blagojević, "High Hopes, False Premises, and Bleak Future": The Case of New Belgrade," in *Modernity in YU*, Belgrade: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2000, p. 5.

* * *

The exchange and mutual introduction of artists from Serbia and Kosovo, which is, according to the words of curators and organizers of the exhibition one of the cultural-political goals of the *Exception* project, was happening mainly 'outside,' in the so-called international context and not through the forms of (inter)national exchange on the local level, in between and within the very two societies themselves. The exception would be the exhibition *Përtej*, held in Center for Cultural Decontamination in Belgrade at the end of the 1990's, which displayed the works of the currently active generation of artists from Kosovo and which, because of the place of exhibiting and its modest format, somehow went undetected, passing underneath the radars of nationalistic politics of the official Belgrade.¹² Considering the reactions in Kosovo, here it is worth noting the recollections of the artist Sokol Beqiri: *I do not know about the organizers, but we were prepared for various kinds of reactions. The reactions were not devastating, however. The worst that happened to us was that we were branded as traitors. A Professor of the Art Faculty in Prishtina did it publicly, through a newspaper.*¹³

In the framework of different *Balkans-oriented shows*¹⁴, the exchange between the artists from Serbia and Kosovo was mainly curated through the 'politics of EUropean integrations,' that is, through the discourse of "truth, responsibility and reconciliation" or of overcoming the consequences of conflicts by means of art and culture. The images of 'belated modernity' of those societies, of a cultural lagging behind, ethno-nationalism and national struggles typical for the "Imaginary Balkans" – as conceptualized by Marija Todorova¹⁵ – were selected to confirm the given cultural-political agenda. The position of the artist in this exhibiting context has been reduced to the task of a "context translator" or "an illustrator of cultural difference who reflects and reinterprets the paradigms and stereotypes of the cultural milieu s/he works in,"¹⁶

Differing from such an approach, the Kontekst gallery profiled itself from the very start as the place for art-activism and politically engaged artistic practices, putting the emphasis on exhibitions dealing with the problematics of different minorities and covering a wide range of issues – from lesbian and feminist issues through to collaborations with various counter-globalist groups and projects and, finally, to the debate about the 'art of periphery.' Already at the beginning of their work, in the first months of 2008, the Kontekst curators organized a series of lectures, discussions and screenings which included a number of theorists and artists from Prishtina and Belgrade and which raised no visible turmoil and conflicts in the public sphere. Those events were, at the same time, a prelude to the exhibition of the young artists from Prishtine.

The exhibition *Exception* itself, according to the curators, consisted of two conceptual units: *The first is about the critical interventions of the artists from Kosovo in the fields of global art representation and the art market dominated by the West; the other unit encompasses the artworks that deal with the problems of Kosovo society and of the state [and the State!] of being*

¹² The exhibition "Përtej" was set up during June 1997 in the *Center for Cultural Decontamination* in Belgrade. Exhibited were the works of Magzut Vezgishi, Mehmet Behluli, Sokol Beqiri and the composer Ilir Bajri. The curator of the exhibition was Shkelzen Maliqi and the organizers were the *Center for Contemporary Art, Fund for an Open Society* and CZKD. ("Përtej" in Albanian means 'above, across the, besides, at the other side.')

¹³ Cf. *On Normality: Art in Serbia 1989 - 2001*, the exhibition catalogue, MOCAB 2005, page 369

¹⁴ "Balkans Exhibitions" are: *In Search of Balkania*, Neue Galerie am Landesmuseum Joanneum, Graz, Austria, 2002, curators: Peter Weibel, Roger Conover and Eda Cufer; *Blood & Honey, The future is in the Balkans*, Sammlung Essl Kunst der Gegenwart, Klosterneuburg/Vienna, Austria, 2003, curator: Harald Szeemann; *In the Gorges of the Balkans*, Kunsthalle Fridericianum, Kassel, Germany, 2003, curator: Rene Block.

¹⁵ Marija Todorova, "Imaginarni Balkan," *Biblioteka XX vek edition*, Belgrade 2006

¹⁶ Cf. Erden Kosova, *The Problematic of National Identity and Social Engagement in the Contemporary Art Practice in the Balkans*, from *Nationalism and Contemporary Art* (ed. Sezgin Boynik and Mina Henrikson, page 177)

“under construction,” focusing on the problems of national and gender identities.¹⁷ My aim here is not to deal directly with the events surrounding the exhibition, but to investigate the exhibition itself, since all the social critique that came out as a reaction to the act of the violent closing of it was already present in the curatorial conception, as well as in the questions raised through the artworks exhibited. After the closing of the exhibition, it seems that the curators and the artists, and actually their whole joint effort, were being in a certain way sanctioned in a two-fold manner: by the fascist organizations and the repressive apparatuses of the state, but also by the professionals, the audience and the informal groups which appropriated this event through the ‘ban’ on the discussion of the content of the exhibition until it opens in a proper way.

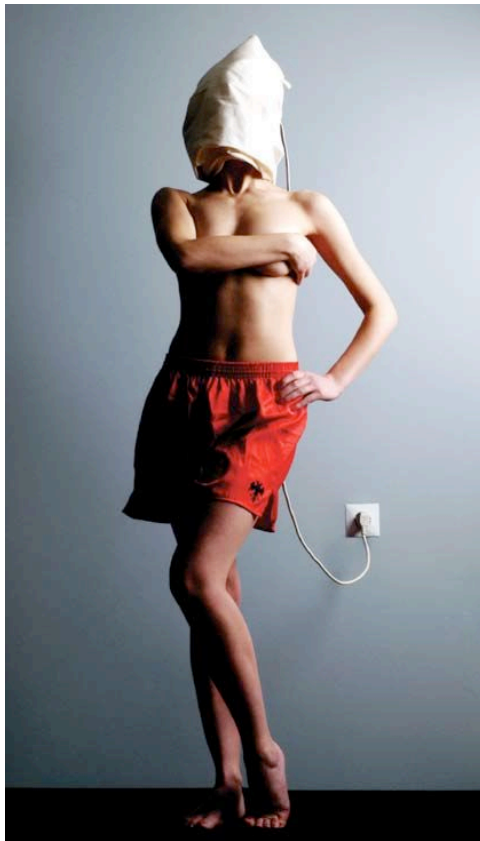


<http://www.pavaresiaekosoves.com>, Artan Balaj.

One of the problems of the Young Art scene in Kosovo, the one that the exhibition *Exception* clearly shows, is the number of works which are uncritically approaching the problems of establishing the Kosovar state and the formation of the new national identity, in this way avoiding tackling the more urgent problems of unemployment, “wild” privatization and the general economical dependence on the international donations and investments. The most obvious example here is the media work www.pavaresiaekosoves.com (translated as www.independenceofkosovo.com, the work seems to be offline now) by the young artist Artan Balaj, which shows a schematic group of figures: a teaching figure stands for the international representative of a bureaucratic machine in Kosovo – UNMIK and the student figures stand for representatives of Kosovo society, while the clock standstill at the time 12:44. This number is representing UN 1244 Resolution upon which a temporary UN management was sent to Kosovo and thus initiated what is being considered from one side to be the process of the institutional constitution of the new state, but also as a resolution which is interpreted from the other side as to further consider Kosovo to be a part of Serbia, hence maintaining the status of the province to be 'in between' any permanent solution. According to the curatorial claim, this rare new media art piece from Kosovo does not make a move forward in relation to the thinking of the “under construction” government of official Prishtine – what it does is to merely repeat it in a tautological manner.

Also, the group of feminist works by artists Fitore Lusufi – Koja, Alketa Xhafa and Nurhan Qehaja clearly show that the issue of feminist emancipation is still considered to be strongly linked to the issue of national emancipation. They repeat the similar strategy of the involvement of the national symbols of flag, emblem and anthem, just like the older generation of their male colleagues whose works have been discussed in this text before. However, these national symbols appear in the form of “detourned images” – as the demonic-backwards singing of the national anthem by the naked woman (Nurhan Qehaja, *The Flag*, 2006), as the flag of conservatism and patriarchalism embodied in the stain of blood of the virgin on white bed linen

¹⁷ Cf. Catalogue *Odstupanje: Savremena umetnicka scena Prištine/ Exception: Contemporary Artistic scene from Prishtine*, Introduction by Vida Knežević, Kristian Lukić, Ivana Marjanović and Gordana Nikolić, page 20

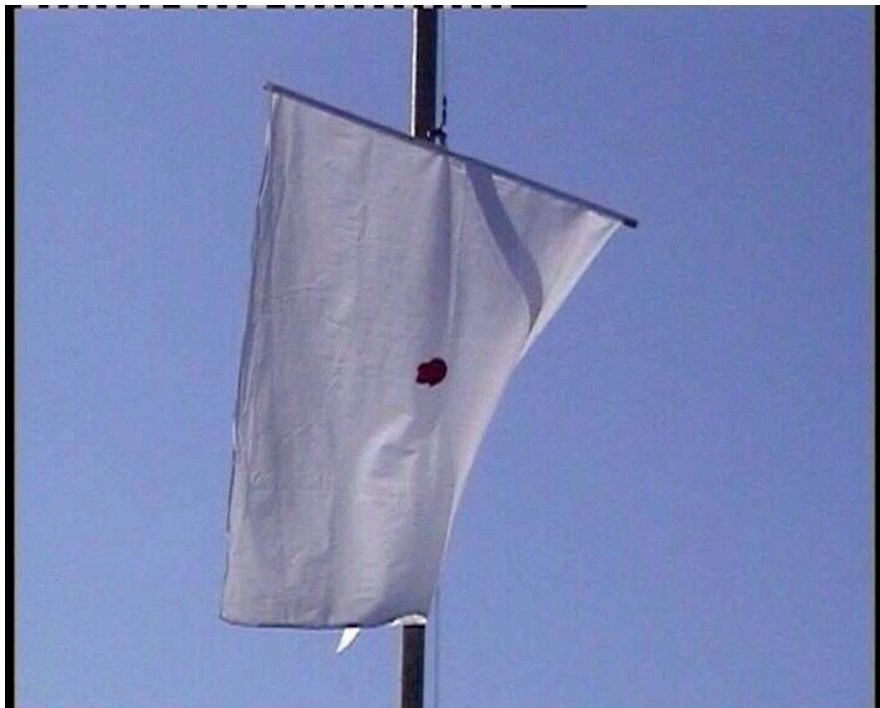


Baby Doll/The day After, Alketa Xhafa, 2007

after the first wedding night (Fitore Lusufi – Koja, *Japan*, 2006) or as the national-ethnic emblem of the double headed eagle on shorts, the only piece of garment on a naked woman-lamp, which outlines the decorative position of woman in the nationalist-macho society (Alketa Xhafa, *Baby Doll/The day After*, 2007). In spite of their critical attitude towards the status and the representation of women in contemporary Kosovo, they are situating their critical observations within the framework of the national state-building, thus in a paradoxical manner standing in line with the very society they are trying to criticize.

Additionally, placing such works within the context of the exhibition-as-the-national representation shows not only how the tools of contemporary art such as media art interventionism or feminist criticism can be limited to the pragmatic goals of the legitimization of the official national identity, but also how conservative politics can appropriate and utilize contemporary art for its own purposes in general. However, the world is based on paradoxes and it is difficult to fight with each and every one of them each step of the way, in attempting to anticipate all the outcomes and

contexts of circulation possible for the original message. Maybe the works by Fitore Lusufi – Koja, Alketa Xhafa and Nurhan Qehaja would function differently in some other possible context for the exhibition which would, for example, give a historical overview of the position of women in the post-colonial struggle – but in this curatorial narrative their emancipatory potential stays limited, encompassed by the boundaries of the program of diplomatic exchange between Serbia and Kosovo.



Japan, Fitore Lusufi – Koja, 2006

However, some of the works included in the exhibition do clearly point to the problems of national representation and to the troubles within contemporary art in general. The work by Lulzim Zeqiri unambiguously settles these aforementioned paradoxes within the very field of contemporary art, showing how the international positioning of the artist dictated by the politics of national identity and neo-liberal inclusivism go together, 'energize' and 'feed' each other as in the concept of Yin and Young. In his video *Heroes* (2003) he presents an image of typical village interiors with traditional furniture, where male members of the Albanian (patriarchal) society in Kosovo spend their evenings singing and playing shargia, the local mandolin-like instrument, performing oral-epic songs about heroism. Within their particular song he interpolates the new heroes – the famous protagonists of the contemporary art scene of Kosovo (according to some claims, young Kosovo society was very proud that eight artists from Kosovo participated in a Balkans exhibition¹⁸, in a similar manner in which in most societies people are proud of the large number of their teams participating in the Olympic games or in different football championships, etc.). The folk singers sing the epic about the heroic gestures of Kosovo artists – their appearances at important international events (Manifesta, Istanbul Biennale, Kassel Exhibition), therefore alluding to the national cultural development, advancement and modernization of the Kosovo 'under construction' state.



Heroes, Lulzim Zeqiri, 2003

enough, but the signifier of 'from Kosovo' is needed in order to confirm the vaunted image of 'all-inclusive internationality.' The artistic statement does not reveal much about the personal position of the artist Lulzim Zeqiri with regard to what I read in his work (his other work titled *White Map* presents the timeless image of the Balkan conflicts and fulfills all the tasks of its stereotypical representation), and I can only guess the position of curators while placing this work in the terrain of the exhibition (besides their dedication to reviewing in a comprehensive way the young art scene of Kosovo). But my observation would be that inside this particular exhibition Lulzim's *Heroes* has the same function as Duchamp's *Pissoir* – they point to the exhibitionary order and institutional context in which they are momentarily placed, discovering at the same time their own ideological function.

This work seems to make another point as well – one which says that the national identity of the artists from Kosovo is instrumentalized from two sides: first within the general tendency of building the new national cultures in post-Yugoslav states (in other words, each state needs its contemporary art to serve the purpose of contributing to the building of the State)¹⁹, and secondly within the *international art scene as institution* where the quality and thematic scope of the artistic work is not

The abovementioned artwork *Heroes* also shows that the issue of the nation, or of national identity, is very much international (within the hegemonic representation of the contemporary internationalism), and that the national identity of an artist from 'periphery' is always already inscribed into the dominant model of exhibition making and the contemporary art system. That may be the reason why the curators decided to dedicate significant space to the chapter *Artist, curator, market* and to analyze the art system structure, its hierarchies, the balance of power in relation to... I would add to this the concept of (national) cultural representation. In their criticism of the art system, the curators of *Exception: Young artists from Prishtine*, they mostly

¹⁸ See Sezgin Boynik, *ibid*, page 218

¹⁹ According to the dominant art historical narrative, there was no contemporary art in Kosovo before the 1990s. For example, in the interview for the catalogue *On Normality*, Sokol Beqiri says: "The Kosovo art scene of today - I think it has great success and energy behind it. I could also point out that I totally agree with Branko Dimitrijević in one of the meetings we had, when he said: *There is a sense in which the young Kosovar artists start from zero-point, which liberates them from the chains of any tradition and which puts them in the position of "total contemporaneity,"* Cf. *On Normality: Art in Serbia 1989 – 2001* (the exhibition catalogue), Mica, Belgrade, 2005, page 379

focused on Balkans exhibitions which, according to them, played a certain role in Euro-Atlantic integration and in the preparation of the ground for global capital in the so-called region of Western Balkans. That is, the curators and artists have shown their positions and opinions towards the production of the mythologized and commodified representation of the Balkans conflicts.



The Uncles, Driton Hajredini.

political, or economic discourses and to affirm, appropriate, or consume them while simultaneously keeping a distance from what is being affirmed. It destabilizes such an affirmation and turns it into its opposite.

This approach is characteristic for the large part of the production in the region of former Yugoslavia and is based upon the experience of conceptual art and its transformation from the producing of the 'representation/object' to delivering an 'attitude/statement'²¹. In this light, the purposeful naïveté of these works manifests itself as an ironic tool that is utilized to challenge the enforced identification with the liberal Western *Weltanschauung* (world view). In all the cases the artists appear as 'peripheral subjects' whose national origin is undistinguishable from their personal names whilst appearing on 'the art scene'; so it can be said that their very possibility to act is already determined and limited by these designations.

This is the framework in which we can read the work by Driton Hajredini called *Sin*. The video presents a document of an event performed in a Christian church in Münster and recorded with a hidden camera, in which the artist (Driton Hajredini) enters the confessional booth and confesses to the priest. He asks him unorthodox questions such as: *I am actually a Muslim but I wanted to ask if it is a sin to be an Albanian born in Kosovo? Can it be called a sin, in a way?* The confused priest replies with *No. Not a sin. Sin is something we, people, do of our own free will, and something which is opposed to the God's commandments*. Or, ironically speaking, we may draw the reverse conclusion. That national identity and nationalism are not dependent on free will and thus are in accordance with the God's commandments.

²⁰ Inke Arns and Sylvia Sasse, "Subversive Affirmation": On Mimesis as Strategy of Resistance, *Maska* (Ljubljana) vol XXI, no 3-4 (98-99), page 6

²¹ Some of the examples are the artworks *How to Become a Great Artist* by Vladimir Nikolić and Vera Večanski (Belgrade), *Choose Life* by Nikoleta Marković and Zsolt Kovacs (Belgrade), *Explosion* by Primož Novak (Ljubljana) and many others. All of this works (like the works by young artist from Prishtine) are using a similar strategy to express their ironic stance towards the obsession with marketing, self-promotion, and obsessive networking in art – all of which being the phenomena that accompanies the artistic production of transitional societies.

* * *

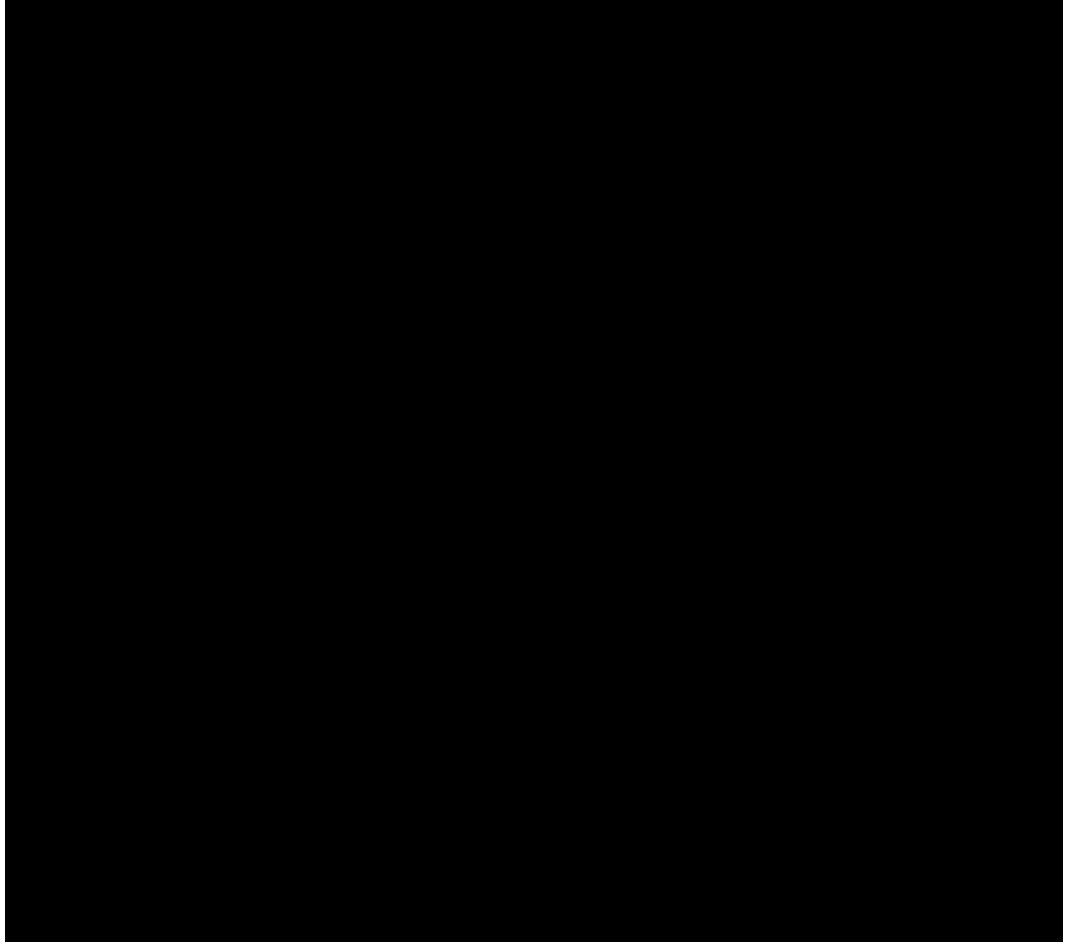
It is the standpoint of the curators, which was repeated by many others later, that the *Exception* project is about a certain kind of getting-to-know the Albanian culture – in other words, that it is about the 'otherness' to which we are to be introduced for the very first time. This diplomatic strategy in the field of art fits entirely into the political guidelines of the European and international foundations, according to which culture serves the social programme by 'introducing the other' in order to respect 'cultural difference,' and which all leads to the final 'reconciliation of the sides in conflict.' The programmatic text *Using of Culture and Art in Conflict Resolution in Contemporary Times* may serve as one of the indicators of dominant prejudices related to the negotiation techniques and 'use value' of contemporary art. It states: "While political talks and diplomatic activities are going to reduce the tension between the two countries, the exchange of artists including painters, musicians, film makers and others will bring about cordiality and amity,"²²

Curiously enough, the violent closing of the exhibition and the accompanying media rampage which mediated this event, empirically challenges such a standpoint and rejects this kind of approach of the institutionalization of artistic practices. The exhibition *Exception* was made as 'the national selection,' obviously and first of all because it was the only format through which it could assure the funding for its realization – paradoxically, it is precisely the platform of such 'assuring of the production' which is being radically denied through the act of the violent closure of the exhibition. Returning to the beginning of this text, here we can again raise the question of the form and the format of the exhibition. That is, of the way in which the curator acts within the apparatus of production. Would the exhibition, if envisioned to be unfolding in a different and 'autonomous' field, one which does not take on the role of diplomatic mediation between two national cultures,²³ have had a different outcome or have opened up a more productive space for discussion? Would the exhibiting of, for example, critical works dealing with the place and role of culture in 'peripheral zones' and representing the collective problems of all the artists from the region, including the issues of nation-building we all witnessed during the past decades [so, the exhibition which is not based on the principle of 'otherness,' but the principle of 'sameness'] have brought about different effects?

From this perspective it seems to be the case. The exhibition *Exception* carried very concrete critical potentials in itself but it was the choice of the form that effectively prevented the very possibility that such questions could be raised for public examination and discussion. Through choosing the form of the national representation of the artistic scene, the exhibition *Exception* limited its scope to being *pro-* or *counter-* in relation to the question of the independence of Kosovo and thus corresponded with the given framework of the existing choices in the field of *realpolitics* and its existing social polarizations. In that sense, in the local context it proved no more than the confirmation of the expected state of affairs: the Serbian fascism towards Albanians on one side and the condemnation of the violation of the politics of human rights including the right to public expression on the other... And it is the task of art to think beyond, and to discover 'the possibilities undiscovered' which are certainly to be found outside of given choices imposed by the dominant politics of culture.

²² This text currently appears to be offline – or at least no search engine can find it.

²³ In this case the curators have defined the field of art in a completely different way and through a direct link with the representationalist politics. *The field of art is a place where, among other things, people talk about something that has to be talked about publicly, in media and parliament, and this is the issue of the past and the issue of the future of co-existence in this area, the issue of the very subjects.* Cf. The catalogue *Odstupanje: Savremena umetnicka scena Prištine/Exception: Contemporary Artistic scene from Prishtine*, Introduction by Vida Knežević, Kristina Lukić, Ivana Marjanović and Gordana Nikolić, page 19



The Image, Nikoleta Marković

What we see on this image (underneath the ‘intrusion’ of the Albanian flag) is a reproduction of the Monument to Kosovo Heroes – a public sculpture in the city of Kruševac, central Serbia, built by the academicist Đorđe Jovanović in 1910 – a typical colonial object of the Ecole de Beaux Art, mixed with national romanticism. In the year 2003, the artist Nikoleta Marković proposed that this image be exhibited as a serial repetition around the walls of the gallery. She used the Albanian flag in place of the flag of the Kosovo hero – Boško Jugović (a character derived from Serbian epic poetry which belongs to the cycle of ‘Kosovo Battle’). The event of the exhibition was Nikoleta Marković’s solo show in the city of Kruševac – the artist’s birth-place but it was cancelled by the director of the National Museum in Kruševac. The work also caused problems in the “37th. Winter Salon” in Herceg Novi (Montenegro). The exhibition curator, Branislav Dimitrijević, was accused of approaching the exhibition with “a surplus of politics and the deficit of art” and consequently quit as the curator. So, I’m concluding this text with an artwork which presents a type of centaurlike connection between “Serbian-hood” and “Albanian-hood” in their common apotheosis, a work which is a container for both nationalist images and presents yet another example of an unsuccessful “diplomatic approach” in the socially engaged art.