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## On Reality Checking – a Retrospective Report from Belgrade

1990s – reality

The 1990s in Belgrade can be described as a dense, complex network of relationships, stories, micro-histories as well as a series of overlappings and interruptions, successions of multiplied and (dis)connected consequences, generally marked by a process of disintegration of the socialist, one-party, multinational and unified state. Wars (first in Croatia, then in Bosnia, and finally in Kosovo), sanctions by the UN and the isolation of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia as well as the breakdown of official communication with the rest of the world, economic collapse with the highest rate of inflation ever recorded, are the main features of this process. Other aspects that accompanied it were ethnonationalism and populism, favored by the political oligarchy, which respectively came back onto the sphere of culture, sharply dividing it in its official version, on the one hand, and alternative networks of communications and activities, as well as alternative codes and semantic structures, on the other. In these circumstances two main tendencies in this so-called ›alternative‹ or ›independent‹ space of art can be outlined: the first is a tendency toward an almost total isolation from actual events, and the other are art practices that reacted to these social contexts and produced new ones.

1990s – ›independent‹ space of art

The activities of Belgrade artists in the 1990s could be roughly categorized into two groups. The first is more typical of the first half of the decade; it is closely connected to conceptualized experiments with form, structure and materials while at the same time remaining under the strong influence of conceptual art and minimalism. The development of this group takes place in the circumstances of the impossibility of

reaching the zone of direct international exchange of information and experience, as well as in the context of the dominance of nationalist-oriented forces within the institutions dealing with modern art. In this way the interpretation (of art criticism)<sup>1</sup> and the (artists')<sup>2</sup> belief that art should be art develops; art becomes here a closed system, an autonomous field which will, by its superiority in relation to everyday reality, contribute to make that reality more noble. Parallel to this orthodox tendency, there was another tendency within the same first group, known to critics as the position of active escapism or »the creation of parallel-fictional reality and quite personal stories which actually would not have emerged if they had not been motivated by the existential reality itself which was sometimes able to surpass fiction itself.«<sup>3</sup>

The second group, however, is more typical of the second half of the decade. It manifests the consciousness of and the sensibility to social and political realities. Artists are faced with a traumatic reality and this encounter ceases to be just a topic, which was characteristic of the position of active escapism, but it becomes a topic to be problematized. We can therefore speak of a theoretically based production which introduces the traumatic real into a new symbolic network, thus producing a new reality situated in competitive relation to everyday and imposed reality, aspiring to acquire influence in the public field. It was Stevan Vuković who, by interpreting the *Reality Check*<sup>4</sup>-project as the first that, in his opinion, was »intentionally questioning the traumatic social and political reality«,<sup>5</sup> established this Freudian principle of the ›testing of reality‹ as an interpretative paradigm for such artistic practice that does not imply the public but produces it. These artistic practices both consume and produce the public sphere as a social, that is, a discursive form. In these cases, the public sphere is understood as an arena of political consciousness and articulation of social experiences through the constant process of challenging and questioning the very same social field.

From this point I would like to address the work of Dejan Anđelković and Jelica Radovanović as an example of art practices involved in questioning a traumatic act. Their artistic engagement/production is about the collision between the actual and the repressed, and produces new meanings and radicalizes some of the aspects of everyday life during the 1990s. Their art works are not so much about ›representing reality‹ and making images, as they are about competing with that reality, acting in this reality, and consequently, participating and creating the public sphere. Finally, conceiving an artistic scene as a construction of one of many possible public spheres means that art with all its tendencies, events, and institutions, as well as the socio-political context, is susceptible to raising different critical issues. In this particular case (in Anđelković & Radovanović's work, as well as in my retrospective story) this means referring to the following topic – art and/ as the public sphere in society excluded from all global developments and realignments, closed and plunged into political and bloodstained ethnic conflicts.

## The public sphere – Art and/as art

»48048 Points« is an unfinished needlepoint, whose motif is Mondrian's *Composition II* (1929), from the foreign collection of the Belgrade National Museum. This art work (»48048 Points«) refers to the controversial theoretical discussion in the Serbian art scene that marked the first half of the 1990s, and which, paradoxically, never took this work into account in its contemplation of the place of Mondrian, and especially of this painting, in 1990s Serbian art. The main point of this discussion was whether or not art should be only and above all Art. In another words, the discussion developed around the issue should art be concerned only with aesthetic issues and formal problems immanent to the artistic medium and material, searching for some utopian ›explanation‹ or is art allowed to reflect on social issues.<sup>6</sup> »48048 Points« (the exact amount of points Ms. Radovanović made) is therefore some kind of bastard of this discussion, a sort of surplus/excess or the damned part of a coherent theoretical discourse which, basically, affirms the model of high art, the heroic role of lonely artist beyond and above the everyday reality.

## Symbolic order – Media in the jaws of art(ist)

*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, a photograph by Jelica Radovanović, was initially made for the cover of the opposition magazine *Republika* (number 41/42, April 1992), but went on circulating in exhibitions.<sup>7</sup> This work strongly refers to the fact that the media in Serbia during the 1990s were the instruments of the regime and the catalysts of war. Milošević's regime inherited a powerful empire consisting of the state-controlled press, radio, and television, including the largest media markets in Serbia. He belonged to the first television generation in Yugoslavia; he grew up with TV and very well understood the power the media possess in modeling reality and public opinion. Thus he immediately expressed the wish to use them for political purposes. Eric Gordy perceives that every important stage in the development of Milošević's regime was followed by the takeover or by the destruction of an important media house.<sup>8</sup> Although the regime, naturally, did its best to strengthen its control over the media and to weaken and destroy the independent media, it was not able to establish a complete monopoly over information. These independent media, among them the magazine *Republika*, worked under extremely limited circumstances and offered people a real, consistent alternative to the official statements proclaimed by the state-controlled media – a feeling of ›independence‹, of living strategies in a limited environment as well as models for the development of strategies of self-representation in relation to the social milieu. The regime shaped the media under its control and the media shaped both



Fig. 1: *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, photo, Jelica Radovanović 1992  
© Courtesy of Jelica Radovanović

Milošević's political body as well as the opinion of those who chose the authoritarian safety of the state media. The remote control that Ms. Radovanović holds in her hand is an instrument of power over the consumption of information, which parallels the index of power that television possesses over the production and distribution of information. In this sense, the remote control becomes the device that offers us a choice, although not a choice with many options but the choice that, nevertheless, includes the possibility of ›switching it off‹ as a form of passive non-acceptance.

## The Real – Art fights back

The project *Without a title* was conceptualized for public space within an exhibition during the Belgrade Summer Festival 1998. However, because of its provocative character, the Belgrade city authorities were opposed to its presentation. It was presented several years later, 2002, at an international event in Pančevo called *The Tenth Biennial of Visual Arts*. It turned out that this piece of work upset the inhabitants of Pančevo as well, so that while it was being set up and photographed some passers-by threatened its authors and swore at them, while others kicked the object and, relatively soon, somebody finally demolished it and removed it. But there were other reactions, too: A large number of passers-by were not aware of the presence of this piece of work; in other words, they did not notice that a common black-and-yellow post had been replaced by a yellowish object. It was a sculpture/object made of stone as a faithful copy of a war shell, which functioned as a bollard on the edge of the pavement in order to physically prevent drivers parking their cars there. The war shell/post/object was meant to remain until the passers-by had worn away its lid, under which there was the text: »Nobody is Innocent.« The idea of »taking the lid off« emerged from the observation of the behavior of passers-by in city streets, who more often than not unconsciously touched the tops of these bollards. There is



Fig. 2: *Without a title*, Dejan Andelković & Jelica Radovanović, Pančevo, *The Tenth Biennial of Visual Arts*, 2002, © Courtesy of Dejan Andelković & Jelica Radovanović

a connection between this unconscious act and the central narrative of the 1990s in Belgrade/Serbia/Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro, today), which was the official/general denial and/or non-acceptance of the reality of war. So this work functions as provoking the return of the repressed, as boomerang which has finally come back, causing the painful ›catching.‹ It is not a sculpture, because it possesses the maximum of mimicry, of submersion into the town's substance. At the same time it has the potential to produce an effect of a sculpture in the formal sense. It could be most accurately defined as an *event-triggering object*. The artists did not perform their presentation before the audience nor for them. By producing an ›aesthetic‹ object/ an object belonging to the world of art, they created the conditions for an event that the audience activated with their (un)conscious relationship to it. In fact, this object, put in the public space, at a busy thoroughfare, opens the door of the unconscious, leading to a confrontation with a traumatic experience – wars in ex-Yugoslavia, lots of guns (and roses), and, finally, bombing. This object initiated the interruption of the circular flow of communication and appeared in the function of a symptom, as a repressed word which is articulated in a coded, ciphered form as an enigma to be interpreted, and whose meaning refers to the unpleasant, and therefore to the unclear and unexplained places of immediate history as well as the (un)willingness to confront them.

## Notes

- 1 On a critical-theoretical explication and interpretation of the Belgrade art scene during the 1990s see Jasmina Čubrilo, *Beogradska umetnicka scena devedesetih*, Beograd 1998, 15-29 and 209-223 (english summary).
- 2 The artists grouped around the *Project Mondrian* (Nikola Pilipović, Zoran Naskovski and Aleksandar Dimitrijević), and the so-called *New Belgrade Sculpture* (Zdravko Joksimovic, Dušan Petrović, Srdan Apostolović and Bata Krgović) could be given as distinct examples, see *ibid*.
- 3 Lidija Merenik, no wave, in: *Fund for an Open Society and Center of Contemporary Arts*, eds., *art in yugoslavia 1992-1995*, Belgrade 1996, 12-36. In the subsequent criticism and history of art the term ›(active) escapism‹ will be applied on examples of the ›neomodern‹ trend, as Merenik defined it, that is on formalistic tendencies. See also Jasmina Čubrilo and Ješa Denegri, *O devedesetim (razgovor)* (About the Nineties, conversation), *Opstanak umetnosti u vremenu krize* (The Existence of the Art in times of crises), Beograd 2004, 10.
- 4 The *Reality-Check*-project was realized in a production by the *Center for Contemporary Art*, in a context determined by the NATO bombings in 1999 and mass expulsion from Kosovo. *Apsolutno*, Jovan Čekić, Mirjana Đorđević, Uroš Đurić, Era Milivojević, Zoran Naskovski, Vesna Pavlović, p.RT, Jelica Radovanović and Dejan Anđelković, Raša Todorosijević and Milica Tomić participated in the project, and their works were formatted as postcards.
- 5 Stevan Vuković, *Private Coldness/Public Cruelty, A Stumbling Walk Through the Nineties*, in: Darka Radosavljević, Jasmina Čubrilo and Stevan Vuković, eds., *REMONT.REVIEW*, Belgrade Art Scene of the Nineties, (Remont – Remont-independent artistic association) Beograd 2002, 87-96.
- 6 More on this discussion: Čubrilo, *Beogradska umetnicka scena devedesetih*, like footnote 1.
- 7 This is a very complex art work which basically rests on the iconography of ›Madonna and the Child. A clear and symmetrical bipolarity on Radovanović's face, achieved by make-up, refers to

the ambivalent nature of representations of abstract ideas such as the state, the homeland, patriotism, a solution which can be contemplated in light of the long tradition of the transformation of the ideas of power, the monarchy, the state as a ruler's political body, on the one hand, and the idealised female figure, on the other. Besides these basic stereotypes, Radovanović uses popular images such as the image of Louis XIV in Hollywood style.

- 8 Eric D. Gordy, *The Culture of Power in Serbia. Nationalism and the Destruction of Alternatives*, Pennsylvania 1999, 73-114.