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Postcommunism and the Rewriting of (Art) History)?

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This text was archived at the Institute for Contemporary Art in Zagreb collection, as part of the **Research project** conceived in 1997 by a SCCAN – Soros Centers for Contemporary Art Network, funded by the Open Society Foundation, New York.

The purpose of the project was to select, collect and disseminate texts on contemporary art practices in the Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, around Soros Centers for Contemporary Art, written in and about art of the 1990s. The coordination of the project was carried out by Janka Vukmir, SCCA – Zagreb, today the Institute for Contemporary Art, Zagreb.

We did not intervene in any of texts more than just correcting obvious typos and spelling. On the occasion of collecting texts, we were given permission from all authors, to rightfully use them. If anyone now has different instructions, please, contact us at the info@institute.hr.

All of the texts we have collected at the time have been later published on the website of the I_CAN, International Contemporary Art Network, the short-lived successor of the SCCAN.

On the occasion of the exhibition **90s: Scars**, revisiting the art practices and social and political context of the 1990s in the postcommunist countries, the Institute for Contemporary Art is now reoffering a collection of **89 texts and a comprehensive list of then proposed further readings**, on the website of the Institute for Contemporary Art, www.institute.hr.

The exhibition 90s: Scars is curated by Janka Vukmir and organized by the Institute for Contemporary Art and the MMSU – Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Rijeka, on the occasion of the **European Cultural Capital Rijeka 2020.** Originally planned to open May 14, 2020, at the MMSU in Rijeka, due to COVID-19 crisis, is postponed until further notice.

Bojana Pejić

Postcommunism and the Rewriting of (Art) History)

The history of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (1949 –1991), was partly constructed on the basis of an insistent emphasizing of differences between the old and the new: the "old" royalist Yugoslavia (the one existing between the two world wars) and the "new" one born after 1945. One joke about the new state that is following the "correct road" to future communism points out the absurdity of the officially propagated version of history: "In old Yugoslavia we had nothing, and then the Germans came and took everything we had!" The transition from the socialist "dogmatism of the One" to postcommunist "pluralism" was a leap (fall) into totalizing nationalism(s). A very similar process of building the new on the basis of the negation of the old is now occurring in the new states that have appeared on the foundations (or rather ruins) of socialist Yugoslavia. The official versions of history in each of these countries, which have, without exception, leaped from state socialism not into democracy but ethnocracy, are also based on erasing the past. Expressed in a new joke this reads: "Not only did we have nothing in communism, but that 'nothing' wasn't worth anything."

Collective Amnesia

Rewriting history and the history of art is a very contemporary question now occupying historians in the so-called postcommunist countries. In the history of these countries the ironic slogan of the Soviet Russian avant-garde, "There are still corpses to be killed," has often been implemented in daily reality. A similar process took place immediately after November 1989, when a new turn of events led from socialist iconophilia to postsocialist iconomachia: it was then that Lenin disappeared from Eastern Europe and the former USSR, and Tito disappeared from Yugoslavia. "Postcommunist" discourse present in the new states of eastern and central Europe and in

the former USSR is characterized by two synchronic processes. The first is the recreation of the collective memory of precommunist times which includes glorification, mystification and falsifying national "tradition." The second is the construction of a collective amnesia regarding the period of communism, and this can become coloured by Eurocentric (even racist) overtones. In this context, communism's greatest sin is taken to be neither the collapse of its economy, nor the absence of human rights, nor the misery, but the suppression of a "national being." Germany is the exception here for the collective amnesia with respect to the GDR manifests itself differently. The war undertaken in "the name of Yugoslavia" in 1991 is a dirty fact that is likewise subject to collective amnesia, although this time it is an amnesia produced in and by the (Western) "art system." When, for example, at some future date someone studies the cultural history of the nineties using the Catalogue of the XLV Venice Biennale held in 1993, this person will not find any mention of the war either in the general introduction to the Catalogue, or in the press releases, or in the texts of the show curators from the newly created states in former Yugoslavia. Nor is there any condemnation of nationalism. This historian will find that there were works exhibited by certain states which in the previous fifty years had not exposed at the Biennale (Croatia, Macedonia and Slovenia for example), but will not understand why in the pavilion bearing the name "Yugoslavia" there was an exhibition entitled Machine della pace (Machines of Peace). In the exhibition catalogue the author of the preface meditates on the theme of the allegory of peace in art, without taking any political stance. Such a stance, if anywhere could be summarized in a footnote. One would mention that the existent Yugoslavia (just like Spain several decades earlier) does not have the right to take part in the Biennale given it is not recognized by the international community due to the war it is waging a war in a state that the same international community has recognized. In the catalogue for the exhibition of central European artists Coesistenza dell'arte (Coexistence of Art), where war is mentioned twice in passing, we are told that Yugoslavia just like Czechoslovakia, "disintegrated," without any mention of the form this "disintegration" took in the two countries.

Yugoslavia Revisited

The idea of progress within the framework of "scientific socialism" (Marxism) was realized in practice by "socialism," which in the particular case of Yugoslavia meant the repression of not one but all of the different national, cultural, and religious traditions. This form of erasing the past coincided with the idea of progress in/of art that was adopted in the fifties by Yugoslavian art criticism and defined by (Western and in a different way

by avant-garde Soviet Russian modernist theory. If contemporary Yugoslavian art criticism did not deal with the question of the national in art (i.e. with elements of Christian orthodox ritual or Muslim tradition in a certain performance) it was not because this was not allowed or censored by the Communist Pa but because the "new" and not the "old" the criterion of modernism. It is in fact t novum and the abstaining from the past t recent postmodern thinkers take to be t original sin of modernism. Since 1948 when the Communist Party of Yugoslavia split from the Soviet model of communism, contemporary art in Yugoslavia developed independently of socialist-realist canons. Fierce debates about the role of art in a "progressive" society during the late fifties and the early sixties developed among defenders of representational (socialist-realist) art that partakes directly in the construction of (political) reality, and the partisans of non-representational (abstract, neoconstructivist) art that had no immediate social function. Although most public monuments erected to the glory of the Yugoslavian revolution and Liberation (in many places today destroyed by nationalists) were modernist and not socialist-realist works of sculpture, the political design and official visual culture in Yugoslavia never altogether lost its socialistrealist touch: photographs and busts of Tito, Lenin and Marx, the manner in which state holidays were celebrated in the streets and stadiums, the decoration of conference halls on the occasion of party congresses, and the way in which male politicians dressed (women were few in Yugoslav politics, and today in postcommunist states there are nearly none). The role of the artist in communist society was in essence similar to the traditional role of the artist under capitalism: the artist-bohemian, artist-individualist (usually male) initiated into the mysteries of creation. To this was added an "Eastern" image: the artist "dissidents" who was fated to be a "victim" of the system. One type of criticism voiced, for example, during the seventies with respect to the New Art complained that "Yugoslavian conceptual artists are not radical enough because not one of them is in jail!"

New Artistic Practice

"New artistic practice," a term drawn from Althusser's conception of "theoretical practice," was an umbrella term used by the younger generation of Yugoslavian art critics to identify post-object art, conceptual art, arte povera, process art, performance and body art, video, artists' films, photo-works, sound environments and New Music. This "other art" appeared in different parts of Yugoslavia immediately prior to and after

1968. It was neither underground nor dissident art, but it was marginalized.[1] It was promoted and exhibited in galleries of university centers (the Student Center in Zagreb, the Student Cultural Center in Belgrade, and the SKUC in Ljubljana), of all the Yugoslav museums, only the Museum of Contemporary Art in Zagreb accepted this new expression early on in the seventies. The "art system" in our type of communism did not require art, already from the fifties onwards, to take part in the construction of reality (although it was not supposed to destroy it!) Whereas in the mass medium of film, directors were even jailed or their films "imprisoned," visual artists were never forbidden to show. Rather, through the mechanisms of traditional art academies, museums, acquisitions, juries and of course financing of artistic projects the regime favoured a politically neutral and essentially petty-bourgeois art. Born as the negation of the modernist work of art and art-as-an-object, the New Artistic
Practice was not aimed at the criticism of the status of the work of art as merchandise for the simple reason that the Yugoslavian economy was not a market economy. This art criticized the channels through which the ': art system" in Yugoslavia functioned. Unlike Yugoslavian "dissidents" who presented politically provocative ideas through rather conventional (and often bad!) figurative painting, the radicalism of the "New Art" consisted in the criticism of authority, totalitarianism, and focused its work on the body, sexuality, construction of femininity that was not expressed through the traditional media of painting and sculpture. The post'68 generation artists now live in a number of separate states. Just as under communism, not one of them has been named professor at an art academy. However, the spirit of criticism of this generation (with a few exceptions) has disappeared and is not publicly manifested or given voice through the medium of art. The artists of this generation (today well into their forties) are strongly criticizing nationalism in bordering states, but not the nationalism and "ethnically clean" culture of their own, expressed with different accents and most strongly in Serbia and Croatia, though also in Macedonia and Slovenia. Erasing the past is as much part of censorship (functioning through similar mechanisms both in Serbia and Croatia) as it is of a far more dangerous process of selfcensorship. An artist from Zagreb, for example, won't mention works or exhibitions realized or held in Belgrade (and vice versa) in the days when Yugoslavia was one nation, a phenomenon that is also witnessed among artists living in the states formed from the ruins of the Soviet Union.

Nationalism at Work

[1] See Bojana Pejic, "L'art paralléle yougoslave", (Dossier yougoslave), Artistes 12, August-September 1982, PP· 7-14.

For those who are involved with contemporary art the war began when a Serbian painter in 1990 (a year before the first shot was fired in Slovenia) cancelled his retrospective exhibition in Ljubljana. At the end of the eighties Serbian nationalism fuelled by intellectual "dissidents" (members of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Art) moved into politics and, at the same time, into mass media and the press (which were largely geared to that kind of politics), setting a new kind of responsibility in front of artists: national "interest" uber alles. For nearly six years now cultural events in Serbia (which together with Montenegro forms the "new" Yugoslavia) have been evolving in a closed circuit: artists are not loyal to the regime because they cannot forgive Milosevic, the "father of the nation," his communist past, but they are loyal to the Serbian "national cause" on the basis of which the Serbian regime (like its Croatian counterpart moreover) is shaping its politics. In Serbia today the "lumpenproletarian [sic] natiocracy rules in culture"[2] and is seen in the reorganization of cultural life. Worse than the days of communist rule (when the directors of cultural institutions had to be members of the Communist Party), leading positions are given to unprofessional president's men. The new director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade, a totally anonymous painter in the cultural milieu, and the new Director of the Student Cultural Center an institution in which, since 1971, Yugoslavian and foreign contemporary art and art criticism have been regularly presented (from Gina Pane to Joseph Beuys and Art & Language) likewise a nonentity, have nothing in common save their membership in the same political party, the Socialist Party of Serbia of which Milosevic is the president. The dilemma confronting the post-Yugoslavian critic in writing history concerns the criteria that are now applicable. When in the presence of a clear-cut case of Heimatkunst, which usually borders on religious and national kitsch, there can be no doubt. But how does one evaluate an installation or a figurative painting if its content is anti-bellicist, yet nationalist? How does one approach a video work or an abstract painting by an artist who openly voices nationalist positions (whether out of conviction, opportunism, or possibly fear), if the artists view is not present in the work? Does the art critic have the right to "erase the past" of a conceptual artist who collaborated with Art & Language and who today has suddenly become "religious"? Does the discipline of art history take into consideration an artist's "ethnically clean" attitudes, or his forms that fulfill an aesthetically "clean" criterion?

Regionalism?

[2] Velimir Kazimir Ćurguz, "Paralelni svetovi kao pokret otpora," Republika, V, 69, Belgrade, I-15. June 1993, p. 32.

"Oh God, whatever can happen to us still in our past was a question posed recently by a Belgrade intellectual. If communism had never existed in central and eastern Europe, the culture that had developed after World War II within the borders of Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Hungary or Czechoslovakia would surely have a different form. Without communism these cultures would have had the same status within Europe as the culture of Greece, Norway or Portugal had (and has even today). The absence of communism will not solve the problem of the relation of the (Western) Center and the centers one finds at the southern, northern and eastern margins of Europe. The common trait of central and east European cultures is that they are small, they are cultures of minor languages. They are usually translated and in them one translates from more widespread languages. These smaller cultures necessarily develop in a dialogue with others, thus forming their identity (as any other culture) in the presence of the other. The advantage that socialist Yugoslavia once enjoyed, and which has fallen victim to collective amnesia, is that its contemporary culture had developed in each of the republics, but within a Yugoslavian context that was much more open to the West than to the East. This did not occur in the name of Yugoslavhood as a "politically correct" communist slogan, but thanks to the initiative of a great number of professional people and institutions (artists, curators, critics, museums or art magazines) who formed that context often despite communism. Had ex-Yugoslavia not disintegrated through war, there would have been a possibility to maintain that context. Without a context all cultures of postcommunist countries are in danger of being regionalized even when, as in Serbia, one insists on the self-sufficiency of the nation (in the momentary "East-West" dialogue, the main role is neither with Rumania, Croatia or Slovakia, but with Russia). In an era of galloping nationalism and the backlash of tradition (and religion), just as historical monuments of various cultures have been, destroyed in the Yugoslavian war, there is also a risk of seeing these contemporary cultures fall prey to collective amnesia within the framework of future peace.