

ARTISTS NATURE GESTURE AND PERFORMANCE IN CROATIAN ART

Marijan Susovski

In Croatian art there is a wealth of artistic forms that interpret the attitude towards nature or the use of nature including space, architecture, gesture and performance.

The choice of media is relative - subject solely to the demands of artistic expression or, more precisely, the choice of artistic means is determined by what an artist wants to convey.

We shall focus here on those radical forms of relationship between artist and nature where nature does not feature as a material fact, an object, but rather a subject of artistic speculative reasoning, a trend present since late 1950s.

The works of GORGONA, a group active from 1959 to 1966 in Zagreb are of particular interest. The members of the group were the artists **Marijan Jevšovar, Julije Knifer, Ivan Kožarić, Đuro Seder, Josip Vaništa** and art historians **Matko Meštrović and Radoslav Putar**. The meetings of Gorgona were often held outdoors, during walks in the vicinity of Zagreb. They watched the sunset together or went for an "inspection of the beginning of spring"; such observations would culminate in writing the reports on the arrival of spring or conceptual proposal for the *Project of Spring*. Their attachment to nature was reflected in *Thoughts for the Month*. In the *Thought for May* the only words are *Thought for May* on the piece of paper with a green square that was meant to open a whole association on the subject of spring and nature. One of the collective actions of the group was *Deposition* (1965) during which a Vaništa's painting was exposed to weather in a winter landscape over several days. The group made use of ready-mades, concepts, behaviour as an artistic act and interventions in space and thus emphasised the importance of the spiritual over mere artisan skill. Gorgona was influenced by Zen specially concerning its notions about space and emptiness. Their favourite sentence was by Lao-Tse The essential lies only in emptiness, which was in fact their thought for February. Gorgona published an anti-journal under the same name and during eighties so called Post-Gorgona journal. One typical example was a number

without any letter, only an invitation was included with a text "Please be present...", without any explanation when, why and where. Gorgona anticipated many of the artistic currents that emerged in meantime in Croatia and also had a direct influence on many artists about which we shall say also a few words.

One of the authors who continued, in a way of Gorgona's questioning of art and real life, lay and truth is **Braco Dimitrijević**. In 1976 he began a series of environments/installations *Culturescapes* in which he established a link between animals, himself, landscape and works of art. Nature in art is juxtaposed to art in nature - to spiritual and animal world.

Artist Željko Borčić prepared in 1973. an exhibition titled *The first World Psychocybernetic Super-Self-Portrait*. It included documentation on Borčić as a physical, psychological and social being - photographs of his naked body, examples of his nails, hair, bodily excretion, documents and other personal belongings.

Tomislav Gotovac frequently employed his naked body as a natural medium to express his feelings towards his environments, as for instance in his action *I Love Zagreb* in 1981, in which he walked down the main street of Zagreb naked.

The exploration of live and dead matter conducted by **Vladimir Dodig Trokut** is also very interesting. He is interested in mental processes involved in the perception of art works that employ vast natural elements like works (*Trokut Exhibits the World, Taking of the Print of the Waves, An Exhibition Under the Sea, A Reflex of the Sky*) magical meanings and cabalistic, esoteric and transcendental connotations (*Beard Grows Three Days After Death*). The elements he uses are crosses, sticks, bread, cutlery, food preserves, stones, guts, plates, shells, bottles and etc. Various materials provide various setting for the relationship of matter and spirit - life and death. Dodig often uses salt in various combinations: salt in seashells, sponges, bottles, musical instruments - playing with their various associative possibilities. "Instead of everything else - salt" says Trokut, salt is what remains after organic matter. Salt is in us (blood), we came from salt (sea). Salt is an alchemical element that denotes the essential, salt is our plasma. Trokut claims things have their "psychomatter" and their "resonance". Confronting things, he tries to achieve their resonance, and by paradoxical situations he attempts to create a new psychomatter. Precisely this is his result: a new psychomatter attained through interventions in ordinary things, a distortion of "total" charges

they possess. Trokut chooses things according to "energy they emanate" that can be used".

Vesna Popržan looks for unusual pebbles and through her interventions emphasises the material properties of stone, depending on its kind, size, structure, shape, surface and colour. Her spatial constructions are arranged in the opposite of fragile and solid, organic and inorganic, volume and space, hung in a tense and uncertain balance. This equilibrium makes sculptures appear temporary, about to fall apart despite the fixed order. Edita Schubert uses timber beams, sticks, canes, leaves in their natural state, with added interventions in the shape of bending, weaving, combing, tying and blending into new shape. She evokes kinaesthetic feeling, recalling rituals and operations with associations of oppression and threat, taming or collecting nature. It is a cruel still life, an image of violence towards organic - a body action (body art) of a tree. It is connected with the civilizational acts of cultivation, transformation, exploitation, submission and destruction of nature

Analysing the shapes from macrocosmic galactic to atomic particles, **Boris Demur** has observed countless permutations of spiral motions and spiral forms, and realised that the spiral is the principle of life in the universe. It is found in basic life forms and genetic substances as the double spiral of DNA and in the cosmic motion of stars and planets, galaxies and the entire universe. Therefore he paints spirals in all sorts of versions. He says that "delving deep into oneself, into one's own spiritual, mental and energy spheres, one penetrates the very substance of cosmos, cosmic spirit and cosmic knowledge".

Vlasta Delimar wants us to see the body as a possible object of art and sexuality as a natural female code that needs to be decoded. She analyses our prejudice and stereotype images of the woman by means of photographic medium using her own figure in painted photographs and photomontages and in performances. Her unconventional approach has been directed toward the field she feels to be the most problematic and neglected in the artistic practice during the Post-Conceptual period - woman as a physical and psychological being in the context of contemporary civilization, a focal problem of the entire post-modern era. There are two levels to her penetration behind the facade of appearances. One involves peeling of outer layers of conventional images surrounding women (mother, housewife, mistress, the object of sexual desire, weak and inferior being), and on the other side is an inner destruction of herself as a

biological woman. Sexuality is part of each human being, and sex is natural need and she accepts it as a pure natural fact. Clothes are symbols of conventions that one adopts when putting clothes on. Taking them off gives us a sense of freedom- a return to nature.

Mladen Stilinović works with small objects of everyday life. He also uses photographs that serves as an additional explanation of the object used. Stilinović is interested in two subjects - pain and death. Abstract feelings of pain and death are symbolized by red and black that cover "dead" objects, "dead" symbols and symbols of death. Words "pain" and " death" are written over the objects. Operating with dead signs and signs of death, Stilinović deals with the death of nature (nature) and the death of art (culture). NATUREART (nature and art) alternate on his black and red paintings. Death in nature is shown by photographs or symbolized by a cross, a casket or a grave, evoked by an assemblage of dried or rotten cakes, and in art it features in the symbols of (dead) artistic Avant-garde trends of the past. Stilinović works with the terms natural-artificial and the subjective feeling of life and death connected with them.