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Group Identity

Metelkova Town in the city of Ljubljana

While I listened to the papers presented at the recent congress and general assembly of AICA in Belfast and Derry in Northern Ireland, and to the subsequent discussions dealing with the main subject, 'Art and Centers of Conflict - outer and inner realities', a number of related questions came to my mind. One of the questions was triggered by the exhibition of the well-known Irish artist Willie Doherty, consisting of a video installation and grained photographs of the typical enclosed urban spaces in Derry, a city divided and partitioned by barbed wire and the 25-year-old memory of the Bloody Sunday skirmish between provoked Irish Catholics and British soldiers. Doherty's art is apparently packed with only visually conflicting structures, while I, a foreign visitor to Derry, its place of origin or genius loci, perceived it differently: as an authentic artistic thought which originated in a specific environment with a complex and emphatically ideological atmosphere. And again: during a discussion which almost became an evaluation of the architectural image of the new Berlin museum dedicated to the Holocaust - the famous museologist Amnon Barzel responded to it very critically - a question arose in my mind: can such a specific architecture with its ideological charge, namely the history of Berlin Jews, be defined by the notion of genius loci,

or is it just a component of an international, perhaps already multicultural space, which is what Berlin is increasingly becoming due to the migration processes?

What is actually the definition of a multicultural society, a society typically distinguished by the principle of pluralistic integration? American academic John Higham defines a multicultural society thus: »In contrast to the integrationist model it will not eliminate ethnic boundaries. But neither will it maintain them intact. It will uphold the validity of a common culture to which all individuals have access, while sustaining the efforts of minorities to preserve and enhance their own integrity. In principle, this dual commitment can be met by distinguishing between boundaries and nucleus. No ethnic group under these terms may have the support of the general community in strengthening its boundaries. All boundaries are understood to be permeable. Ethnic nuclei, on the other hand, are respected as enduring centers of social action.«

I decided for this rather long introduction because of the need to define the identity of a specific group in Slovenia, a country characterized by its high level of a natural, unforced integrationist culture which had, after persevering through two Yugoslavian states, basically brought about the secession of Slovenia and at the same time the stratification of a previously socialist society. This high level was achieved mainly due to a uniformity, or perhaps even a monolithic structure deriving from a unified linguistic structure; the Italian and Hungarian minorities in Slovenia uphold their linguistic cultures within the framework of a special primary educational system.

And now to the above-mentioned group, which has recently assumed the name Metelkova Town. To describe its identity, I'll borrow a formulation from Maurice Hayes; this particular Slovenian group was probably not very rigorously conceived as a unity from the outset, but it now displays enough symptoms of it: »The solidarity of the group is an important support for the individual, who can often only realize himself through identification with the group. (The group can, of course, also be a constraint on individual freedom and development.) In the same way as an individual needs to be secure in himself, and this indeed is one sign of maturity, so groups, especially minority groups in society, need to develop self-confidence. A self-confident group, secure in its own values, can deal with other groups much more constructively than a group which is insecure, lacking in self-confidence, or which sees itself as oppressed or undervalued by wider society«. (Maurice Hayes: Whither cultural diversity, published by Community Relations Council in Belfast, 1997)

»When on September 10th, 1993, organized groups nonviolently took over the former barracks of the Yugoslavian People's Army on Metelkova Street in Ljubljana and turned it into a cultural center, many observers understood this event as a decisive action which reinstated civil society in Slovenia. Along with democracy, this civil society was to get, apart from the old enemy of managerial socialism, a new enemy in the form of managerial nationalism, and with the seizing of the Metelkova Street premises yet another, quite unexpected one - the commissars and actual managers of the civil society«. This is what a foreign visitor, Nikolaj D. Jeffs, said at the 4th anniversary of taking over the premises on Metelkova Street, the anniversary which the editor of the Metelkova Street File, Slovenian journalist Miha Zadnikar

called the ultimate defeat of the alternative culture of the 80's and the unfortunate first victory of its arrogant, compromising and ignorant/omniscient descendants.

The facts of the matter were the following: on that night some 150 to 200 very young people scaled the walls enclosing the premises of the former army barracks complex on Metelkova Street in Ljubljana and established informally their activities in the partially pulled down buildings, where the electric and water mains were turned off a week later. These young people, 'Metelkova Street kids', bonded on emotional, social and solidarity levels, though the problems they had brought with them remained, problems like mutual distrust, individualism, ethnic and class hierarchies. What was far worse and more crucial, however, was the system which opposed them from without - the economic, big capital interests to have the buildings torn down. The only way the group from Metelkova Street could achieve unity was by remaining an amorphous mass, without visible individual representatives who could grow estranged through talks with municipal authorities; the brightest experience of the Metelkova Street phenomenon is its ephemerality and fragmentariness, the two qualities so often denounced by others, which make it rather unclear who is what and where - wrote Miha Zadnikar. Municipal authorities wished to pull down the complex to make room - on paper - for studios, concert and theater halls, a ballroom, a library, and a youth hostel - a project which nobody believes is genuine (garages being a more likely alternative), despite the opening of a new Slovenian Ethnographic Museum in one of the buildings, which was however financed mostly from the national and not municipal budget; and in another former military building a temporary collection of the Art of Eastern Europe in dialogue with the West (from

the 1960's to the present) which the Museum of Slovenian Modern Art in Ljubljana collected and opened in the time of Manifesta 3 during this summer.

Before I proceed to show some of the pictorial material from Metelkova Street I would like to quote a part of Andrej Morovič's opening speech at this year's 4th anniversary celebration (Andrej Morovič is the head of the theater group): »We have developed democratic patterns which actually work in practice, and we have shown our fellow citizens with a rebellious streak in them that personal and communal growth is possible also without a dictate from above. We provide a peaceful cultural oasis in the middle of a violently tumultuous urban chaos for a great number of people.

Metelkova Town would like to point out to the city of Ljubljana that without high-quality cultural events there is no tourism; that without a creative ambiance one can not live but just vegetate miserably; that without some creative cultural experiments not even the easily digestible products of the cultural establishment can exist; that even the most backwater village requires something resembling Metelkova Town, or else our hopes for the future, our youth will be driven into debauchery, adultery and violence. And we wouldn't want that, now, would we?

Metelkova Town therefore suggests to the city of Ljubljana that the municipality proclaim our little island of solid chaos a national reserve of urban culture, and lists the buildings as monuments. If it feels that it absolutely must get involved, let it then provide us with at least basic working conditions worthy of a European capital city.«

The Metelkova town is now the member of Trans Europa Halles, which includes 24 multicultural centres through whole Europe. But there is still a very open official tendency to “improve” the alternative scenery: the University, the Ministry of Culture and the Community of Ljubljana signed together a letter in August 2000 to find just here in Metelkova the place for new buildings for all the three art academies (i.e. music, theatre and plastic art). Such kind of “reinvention” or established artistic comfort will unfortunately bring a definite cut down to all the nowadays activities in Metelkova Town!

P.s. The activities of Metelkova Town can be found on web side

<http://www.ljudmila.org/retina/metelkovamesto>