

XXXVII Aica Annual Congress 2003
PUBLIC ART/POPULAR ART

Prof. Milanka Todić

The Art in Street Protests

Yugoslavia of the 1990s, a territory without precise borders. At that time of dissolving values, loss of identity, disappearance of institutions the purpose of alternative scene is no longer in providing a different view, different reality, but rather in generating new ideas. The official system of culture joined the verbal war and encouraged a number of artists and intellectuals to deliberately opt for "action through art" since any action through politics and democratic institutions had become utterly meaningless and impossible. Namely, the big protests held on the 9th of March 1991, in which a hundred thousand citizens of Serbia were present, ended with a dramatic armed intervention of the police and the army that shed blood on both sides of the barricades. The end of a system and of a state was metaphorically presented by the artists gathered in an organization called Ice art. Their symbol was the Yugoslav flag with a five-pointed star stuck in a basket filled with ice.

An appeal to boycott Radio Television Serbia (RTS) and petrified institutions of the chaotic state signed by 200 outstanding intellectuals and artists, had far greater importance, indicating the conception of an activist

unofficial scene-the beginning of grouping during 1992.¹ That was, on the other hand, the time of initiation of alternative information systems and independent TV productions that won over the audience that lost faith in state broadcast media. Even though the federal inspector for radio communication forbade program broadcasting to the independent Radio B92, nevertheless it continued to operate with interruptions thanks to the listeners' support. We may say that Radio B92 became "a point of conversion of all the energy of urban sub-cultures and rock music. In addition, Radio B92 continuously devised and initiated various actions" in which participated many marginal artists and heterogeneous radio audience.²

However, when the UN introduced sanctions, the artists faced a life in isolation, in a sort of ghetto. Consequently, they rejected the traditional forms of artistic methods and started making process projects, performances, installations, and other forms of artistic actions. In a word, the artists surpassed the limits of a mono-medium in the search for multi-media, bearing in mind that it is possible to influence the whole social system by changing the aim of art. It must be emphasized that at the time some non-artistic organizations used the same alternative strategies, such as the performances where the citizens participated in immense groupings. Such multi-media performances were used even by the governing party to break the protesters. On the other hand, the action called "Scientists for the Salvation of Serbia" was an action of protest in which respectable scientists publicly paraded in front of the building of Serbian

¹ M. Dragicevic-Sesic, *The Art in Protest*, in *The Last Decade, Serbian Citizens in The Struggle for Democracy and An Open Society 1991-2001*, Belgrade 2001, 43.

² V. Curgus Kazimir, *From Islands To The Mainland*, in *The Last Decade, Serbian Citizens in The Struggle for Democracy and An Open Society 1991-2001*, Belgrade 2001, 17.

Academy of Science and Arts and signed a petition against the regime that was leading Serbia into isolation. In 1992, the Center for Anti-War Action and the parties of opposition organised a series of mass actions, in one of which the citizens of Belgrade carried a black mourning band, 1.300 meters long to express their condolences on the victims of the war in Yugoslavia.

The alternative artistic scene was engaged throughout the entire winter semester of the 1992 and 1993 when the students and professors of the Universities of Belgrade, Novi Sad and Nish spent many weeks in pacifist walks through the streets; in spite of the government authorities that urged them to return to the classrooms. That was the time of great economical crisis and enormous inflation that made the people stand in long queues in front of the almost empty shops for several hours. But the students, intellectuals and artists couldn't accept that passive position of a victim, so they offered an alternative way of free gathering. Many people joined the protest and went to the streets, knowing that they were in juxtaposition to the silent, long lines in front of the shops. Not only did the energy of the youth differ these two files that lived in the same time and space, and so did the clear conscience of the street spectacle.

The ritual of everyday gathering was always held at the same time and had the same procedure - that of a carnival: loud rock and alternative music, whereas the state radio and television stations were broadcasting a sort of quasi-folk music called turbo-folk. There was also a great multitude of pacifist messages on the protests such as "Don't count on us" and every protester had badges and whistles. The ironical, witty and pacifist messages written on the

banners began to appear on the city walls, too. Therefore, the streets of Belgrade were, at the time, a sort of an open gallery of anonymous graffiti artists. Messages like: "Serbia kills me" or "It's spring, and I'm still in Belgrade", written in vivid colors and large letters aimed to animate ignorant neighbours and passers-by and to make them rethink about the consequences of a civil war. A project of "street signs" like the Tuga (Sorrow) distributed by the *Skart Group*, or the posters Dosta! (Enough!) offered by the *FIA group*, become the artistic practice marking the alternative popular art. A poster from the series "Enough!", inspired by the photographs from the Spanish civil war, predicted and alerted about the bombing that followed some years later (in 1999).

The new breakthrough on the public spaces starts in mid 90s, when students, artists and citizens of Belgrade walked through the streets using whistles, drums and masks in order to make carnival's freedom. That was a 100-day civil happening with thousands of artists. It was obvious that people had not left political struggle and radical engagement. Instead of civil war they made an ambience wherein it was necessary for them to continue their walk and their public speech - to continue their critical examination of reality but in the form of relaxation. One of these everyday walks at the end of 1996 was headed by a puppet with the face of Slobodan Milosevic in convict clothes, as a carnival's marionette. During that walk the protesters lit several hundred candles in front of the official mass media "RTS" and "Politika" that were attacked with paper airplanes. Also, when the police was blocking for several weeks a street through which the protesters always passed, the protesters organized in front of the

police cordons all sorts of performances such as theater plays, concerts and dancing, and the painters held big mirrors in front of the faces of the policemen.

Other in situ artistic projects of the mid 90s were organised on The Belgrade Theatrical Festival and The Belgrade Summer Festival. These traditional festivals enabled the alternative artists to participate with their politically engaged projects. Therefore, in The Belgrade Summer Festival of 1998 under the slogan "Urban Provocation" the artist Ivana Vujic made a performance called "Flying against lethargy" that emphasized the sense of individual action by its collage form. On the following year, in the frame of the same festival, a series of artistic actions called "Fragments of meaning" was held in the streets of Belgrade. As a part of that series, Dragoslav Krnajski placed an installation made of enlarged anti-tank barriers on one of Belgrade squares, but it had to be removed after a week because, as the authorities claimed "it marred the urban context".

The years marked by different street happenings changed some important and typical socialist rules of conduct. It was prohibited to photograph many institutions, and the police was free to confiscate the film from the camera of anyone who would try to violate that ban. But a new sensibility and personal courage was awakened by active participation the street carnivals, in which thousands of people were no longer mere objects of photographs - in fact, they took images of themselves. Not only did the professional photographers and cameramen take pictures of the thrilling days of protests - but the very participants of the demonstrations took charge of the visual documentation of the

exciting events. They actively represented themselves even though their cameras were technically and professionally inferior to the ones that the government reporters used. Photo and video cameras became the most popular means of representing events, and no one cared whether some of those pictures should end up in police records or should they remain a kind of souvenir and testimony of personal participation in the crucial moments of social turbulences. Since the state broadcast media presented a twisted and politically marked view of street happenings of many Serbian cities, the demonstrators relied on their own capabilities of visually recording complex situations. They were at the same moment both participants and reporters of the carnival, and that is why their recorded material possesses that unique and authentic presentation of reality.

The students' and civil protests persistently lasted in the 90s because they had a strong desire to oppose to the official government, but in a way yet unheard of: they faced the aggressiveness of the regime with relaxed and peaceful walks - a unique mass performance. The walk, as a old form of carnival, united different experiences of folklore celebrations and processions. It was in opposition with the official celebrations, such as military parades for the May Day and organized receptions of the late president Tito and other important statesmen. The people in the walks were from different social classes, and had different ways of expressing themselves throughout the walks. During these walks many flags were flying, some had pacifist messages, some the symbols of faculties and artistic societies, and some had images of orthodox saints. Many protesters carried banners and placards that said "Turn off your tellys and open

your eyes", "I walk, therefore I think", "I'm here with my mother-in-law" and many more. But the principle of carnival behaviour was maintained not only by friendly and open communication between the protesters but their communication with the police and passers-by, as well.

According to Bahtin, the importance of a carnival is its natural, friendly contact between the people, who are separated in ordinary life by insurmountable social and political differences. The newly regained freedom that the protesters felt introduced not only a specific language of the street, nourished chiefly by the internet and mobile phones, but it also introduced a new fashion. That street fashion emitted the message that prevailed among the protesters: (and that was) total rejection of the conventional socialist moral and stereotypes in behaviour. All participants of the walks, regardless of age, social status, sex and education blew their whistles, carried banners, danced to the music (sometimes merely in order to get warm), they wore badges and comfortable clothes and sneakers. In the time, among many who walked in the streets, there were to be found even those who kept silent when their property was taken away from them, and when they lost civil rights, after the Second World War. They were conspicuous because they wore elegant and valuable furs alongside with sneakers, badges and whistles.

Music was the identification for the rivers of demonstrators - the parties of opposition and students listened to reggae and rock, while the officially organized meetings of the government were always followed by the quasi-folk music. While awaiting for the elections in the year 2000 the loud music of drums and trumpets

was being listened to in order to give the people final strength and determination. The Goran Bregovic's number "Kalasnjikov" from the movie of Emir Kusturica "Underground" became the hymn of the streets, for it emitted the energy needed to surpass the depression and disappointment in the social institutions.

The thoughts and emotions of the artists, faced with the horrors of the war and violence of the regime, find their answers in unusual creative expressions, making new artistic breakthroughs. That is how the artistic expression of the 90s goes beyond a single genre, a single medium, and the choice of multi-media clearly reflects the awareness of the need to cross all traditional borders - by using performances, video art with other installations, complex assemblages, process projects, and so on.

We may say that this ritual form, similar to carnival, provided a great contribution to the creation of public art and public resistance to dominant totalitarian ideologies. Ritual, as the oldest form of theatrical expression is once again in the focus of research. The era of spectacle has made the ritual indispensable. The participation of the audience is the key word, requiring once again the introduction of ritual patterns where the audience becomes the willing participant enjoying in the event rather than the mere passive interpreter-recipient of events. That is how the whole city began to participate by making creative graffiti, models and installations both humorous and with messages of pacifism.