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Staged (In)Visibility

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My immediate reaction when I first read the abstract for the Strategies of (In)Visibility conference was a certain discomfort. I should immediately try to clarify the reasons for such a feeling. It had nothing to do with the contents or the style of the abstract itself, but with a kind of echo, an irrational déjà-vu coming from the past. Somehow I could not suppress the reflex of rejection towards the main topic of the conference. This initial discomfort forced me to tackle the fact of refraining from discussing politics and the political implications of artistic practices. It became obvious to me, that this rejection or abjection was mainly the result of my upbringing in a communist country.

With this essay, I want to suggest that this abhorrence to discuss politics in the context of post-socialist countries with one party system contributes to this debate about (in)visibility. The reason I find this visceral rejection that verges on the abject to be relevant is not simply because I was born and educated in such a system, it is also because the artists whose art I am going to discuss later, started working in similar circumstances. More precisely, my paper will deal with the art that was produced in a period of transition, at the time of the shift from socialist to post-socialist societies in the ex-Yugoslav countries. I will try to shed some light on that period by first making a difference not between art, activism and these protagonists strategies towards (in)visibility, but between art that is

about the political and art that enters and functions within the realm of the political. In fact, even activists projects can take part in discussions about the political without actually transforming the political and vice versa, art projects can enter and transform the political sphere.

Making visible the political

Instead of discussing the work of artists that chose anonymity because of their fear for the success of their activities e. g. making visible the invisible as the title and the abstract of the conference suggest, I have chosen to discuss the issue of making visible the political as such. This is something that art dealing with political issues, art acting from within the political and activism have all in common as their starting aim. From this perspective, the difference between pure art and engaged art becomes less relevant, and here I refer to the recent discussions on the politics of aesthetics in the context of Jacques Ranciere's writing.[1] In order to clarify the phenomenon of rejection from the political I experienced, I need to unearth where this political abject comes from. To do so, I will need to go back to the 1980s and refer to the now non-existent cultural and political geography of ex-Yugoslavia.

Let me first mention that the original theoretical context of the term abject, was defined by Julia Kristeva in her book *The Powers of Horror*. For her, the abject has religious roots and it is mainly about a form of primal repression and transgression. She writes: "Discomfort, unease, dizziness, stemming from an ambiguity that through the violence of a revolt against, demarcates a space out of which signs and objects arise."[2] However, for Kristeva, the effects of abjection can only lead to the constitution of ones own culture:

"The abject is the border, not me, not that not nothing either. A something that cannot be recognised as thing, A weight of meaningless, on the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of reality that if I acknowledge it annihilates me. There, abject and abjection are my safeguards; the primers of my culture."[3] The political abject in ex-communist countries was definitely the primer of one's own culture for one's feeling of discomfort from political culture. It was the only alternative so that these two were not to be mixed. As with any of the food mixing taboos that Kristeva speaks about, if the mixture between politics and culture would have taken place, the loathing was the only final result.

I am not sure whether Kristeva would agree with the idea of taking the abject out of its original context and applying it in a political context, but the fact that she never wrote an explicit book dealing with her Bulgarian past can make one think that this was after all a possible result of a similar rejection on the verge of abjection of the experience of the political in her youth. (She did address the political, though, in *Strangers to Ourselves* and when writing on the political thinker Hannah Arendt).

That is one of the possible answers to the question why artists in the East have still not delved in the possibilities offered by activist artistic practices. In the late 80s and at the beginning of the 90s, there was hardly any art in East Europe that was not dealing with the political issues of the dissolution of communist states. It was during that time, that the political became visible (in contrast to the clandestine art practices from the previous periods when even abstract art had a certain political meaning). However, this resurgence of interest in the political is not the same as to say that these artists were activists. Even though now there are already few artists and art groups that are just starting to enter the realm of agitation and activism, the activists groups exist in a much larger

extent (during the 2003 elections in Macedonia there were 160 NGOs and they all entered an association supporting the coalition of two parties that won the elections and now rules the country at the moment).

Positionalities

In the 80s in ex-Yugoslavia, there was not much choice of different political positions for intellectuals, artists, writers and other professionals who were not convinced by the communist party programme. However, three main different options could be distinguished and all of them were necessarily unofficial, illegal or oppositional: One could completely distance oneself from the only official political party and secretly boast ones non-belonging status (unless the membership card would have accidentally dropped out from his/her purse). Even though in the 80s (especially after Yugoslavia's leader Tito's death in 1981) some of the writers being members of the communist party, would be writing journalist comments with titles such as *Who is not with us is against us*, to be active intellectually and yet not to be a member was possible and even popular. Moreover, party members were despised and isolated by the inoperative intellectual communities and were forced to socialise among them. The second possibility was the preserve of the most courageous. One could belong to, at first clandestine but very soon openly publicised, nationalist movements. The nationalists were already publicly visible and audible in the 80s but their activities were not legalised. Very soon in the late 90s the different nationalist oppositions in the different republics incited the split of Yugoslavia and the ethnic conflicts resulting with most horrible local wars. These two different positions were not isolated from each other, though. One could be a member of the

communist party and yet be a nationalist, or boast to have an apolitical past and still be a secret member of the party. In fact, the latter was the most ambivalent position available - being a communist party member but remaining non-active in public, belonging without belonging. Being after the easy access to power (guaranteed were not only small privileges but the membership was required for any university or managerial position) and yet criticising it was a kind of simulated opposition and it was seen as the worst hypocrisy. Although from today's perspective, this sounds as a fake opposition it was not that innocent or safe. If a clandestine member would have been discovered, there was no turning back to the intellectual flock and this ambivalence would have ended with being persecuted by both cheated sides.

This popular position was perhaps the most comfortable one, but it could not last for long. I want to argue that even today this intertwinement of different political positions continues today in all countries that emerged after the dissolution of ex-Yugoslavia, an intertwinement that makes problematic the engagements within the realm of politics. The parties were changing their names and leaders, members were fluctuating from one party to another and they still do. The non-governmental organisations are pretty much involved in this chaotic wannabe democracy. Many things did change after the war conflicts and the need to question and re-position ones own attitude towards the political after the conflicts inevitably popped up. However, the political ambivalence from the past mixed up with the political awakening of the present, resulted with a very specific political scene.

Change of languages

Today, and not only in the East, it becomes almost impossible to tell the right from the left, the democratic from the conservative, or the nationalist from the fundamentalist. Such entangled political positions seem to have reflected directly onto the art scene and with artists. How can we expect the artists and activists dealing with political issues to be consequential in their addressing something that is not consequential as such. If the political arena changes its language, artists will inevitably begin to deal with these issues or even more when functioning in the political framework they need to change the language, not necessarily meaning that they will have to mime it. The example of the Slovenian art group IRWIN, a part of the NSK movement established in 1983 and later re-named NSK State, can serve as the best example of such a need for changing the language of art and its relation to reality.

In this context, I want to evoke the case of the most renowned intellectual from ex-Yugoslavia the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Zizek who underwent a similar political context in the early stage of his career (and whose name is linked with the activities of NSK and *Laibach*, the music group part of NSK). In 1976, he published his book *Sign, Signifier, Letter* both in Slovenian and Croatian. With this book, he started the first serious reception of psychoanalysis in Yugoslavia. However, with this book, it was almost impossible to anticipate the political application of psychoanalysis of Zizek's later texts. The book deals with a very complex reading of Lacan linking psychoanalysis and the Borromean knots and entanglements between the order of the real, imaginary and symbolic with contemporary philosophical interpretations of Hegel and Kant. However, there were no references to concrete events and persons from daily life in Yugoslavia and psychoanalytical plays with any political or social

issues, the style of writing that later put Zizek in focus on the international intellectual scene.

Even though in some texts the psychoanalytical concept of the Law of the Father could have been read as the political figure of Tito, this would have been deliberately left ungrounded in the texts. It was not until the late eighties and early nineties when Zizek started writing his famous essays on film. He then first embarked on his cultural crusade focusing instead on a completely philosophical discourse. Interestingly enough, at the very same time, in 1990, he became the official *Liberal Democratic Party* candidate for Presidency of the Republic of Slovenia. The famous essay *Why are Laibach and NSK not Fascists?* that Zizek wrote in 1993 about the Slovenian music group *Laibach* and the phenomenon of the artists collective NSK was the first text that tried to explain the NSK phenomenon which started in 1984 when three groups that were established in 1983 (the music band Laibach, the five art member collective IRWIN and the theatre *Gledalizce Sestre Scipion Nasice*) gathered under the same name NSK (*Neue Slowenische Kunst*).[4]

What most deeply holds together a community is not so much identification with the Law that regulates the community's "normal" everyday circuit, but rather identification with a specific form of transgression of the Law, of the Law's suspension (in psychoanalytic terms, with a specific form of enjoyment). He then gives as an example, the enjoyment of Ku Klux Klan's secret enjoyment of torturing their black victims.[5] In fact, I would suggest that a similar enjoyment was shared in the ex-Yugoslavia among intellectuals and artists who did not accept to get involved in the country's political life, solidarity-in-guilt adduced by participation in a common transgression of the communist rules.

This uneasy feeling is fed on the assumption that ironic distance is automatically a subversive attitude. What if, on the contrary, the dominant attitude of the contemporary "post-ideological" universe is precisely the cynical distance toward public values? What if this distance, far from posing any threat to the system, designates the supreme form of conformism, since the normal function of the system requires cynical distance? In this sense the strategy of *Laibach* appears in a new light: it "frustrates" the system (the ruling ideology) precisely insofar as it is not its ironic imitation, but over-identification with it - by bringing to light the obscene superego underside of the system, over-identification suspends its efficiency. [6] By using the Althusserian model of ideological state apparatus, Zizek calls for an interpretation of *Laibach* and NSK that remained as a kind of starting reference for each reading of the practice of this phenomenon.

Staged dangerous liaisons

One thing that Zizek gets right (there are many discrepancies and contra-dictions in his text and in later texts that can be found on various projects of NSK and *Laibach* performances) is that there was mostly no life/death threat for either the state or for intellectual and art projects. They were often regarded as harmless or simply overlooked by the communist party. The story of the *Day of Youth* poster scandal from 1986/1987 when *New Collectivism* design group (the sub-group of NSK which consisted of some members of Laibach, IRWIN and the theatre collective *Gledalizce Sestre Scipion Nasice*), through a strange succession of events, caused a real confusion between the art and political world, shows exactly the fragility of the claim of danger and threat for art entering politics. The scandal aroused when a *New Collectivism*'s

poster that won the first prize in the national competition and was already distributed for the *Day of Youth* (Tito's official birthday that was celebrated each 25th May along Yugoslavia) was withdrawn when the authorities were warned that it showed the proximity between socialist realism and Nazi Kunst (the poster was actually a re-design of a Nazi poster by Richard Klein from the 1930s, an obvious, but indistinguishable fact for the jury). Following the scandal that indirectly connected communism with fascism the yearly ritual of celebrating Tito's birthday was abolished, but yet nobody was imprisoned or tortured, unless you did not count the endless interviews with the members of Laibach on the State TV or in the magazines in which the journalists repeated asking similar questions to the one that was on everybody's mind: But are you fascists, are you really fascists?[7]

Therefore the invisibility entertained as a deliberate artistic practice from its start is paradoxical - it cannot be a strategy that is forced to artists for protection of their integrity or for guarding their ideas from the centres of power. In contrast to some risky art actions and concepts that put their authors in a real danger there is also often a kind of hidden agenda among artists or wannabe activists: it is often hypocritically pre-calculated and aims to use the energy of curiosity and expectation from the viewers. I want to critically reflect on certain artists and especially art groups that flirt with these strategies in order to acquire the desired attention. Once they are ready to reveal the clandestine identities of the individual members of the group, previously kept hidden under the excuse of a hypothetic danger, they expose their strategy and enable the questioning of its ingenuity. This paradox can be explored through the case of the Slovenian art collective IRWIN from the start of their career, or through the case of Zampa di Leone (still unknown author(s) of an art web site from Serbia and Montenegro) as some

of the most relevant examples of such an investment in invisibility as a process that leads towards an inevitably fast success.

Zampa di Leone's *In the Arse of the Balkan 2000-2005* comic strip web site both jokes with artists including the most renowned artists and projects such as successful IRWIN's group recent projects, the artists Tanja Ostojic, Milica Tomic and Uros Djuric, and the curators Marina Grzinic and Branko Dimitrijevic and aims to a cultural critique of the representation of the Balkan art scene in a Western art context. Their graphic drawings and language aims to be a kind of subversive activism but there is definitely a certain ambiguity in Zampa di Leone's attitude towards activism. Although they state: In the *Arse of the Balkan* "is dealing with the phenomenon of cultural activism and artistic practices in the West Balkan region and Europe in the last half of decade"[8], their ironical approach towards activism becomes clear through other texts. However, according to the clandestine author the web site will fulfil its mission with any change of in the local situation and the notion of change is definitely an attribute closely related with that of activism. It is obvious that the target of this project is not the political in general but the art politics of the Serbian and Balkan art scene.

The question here is whether the anonymity of the artist was really necessary and what is the danger that could harm either the project or the artist behind it. Obviously, there is only one danger that can be detected in this case, the one of not including the project within the kind of exhibitions that were already highly criticised in the comic strips by the author. Should we believe the artists claim that there have been already 10.000 visitors to the web site: perhaps none of the criticised exhibitions had such a big audience. However, any kind of judgment or justification of the effects of this ambivalent strategy is difficult and problematic.

This acted dissident-ship among artists is a renowned phenomenon in East Europe that resulted from the complex cultural conditions during the communist and post-communist periods when the distinction between the real and staged danger was difficult to make. The renowned Ranciere's statement that political art is always a kind of specific negotiation not between politics and art but between the two politics of aesthetics - or the Deleuzian claim that an important characteristic of minor literatures is that everything in them is political was the best experience among artists in Eastern Europe. Whether abstract or realistic, any art by non communist artists could be interpreted as against the communist programme, an interpretation that sounds very similar to that of "Who is not with us is against us".

Paradoxically enough, the troubles with the political continued after the dissolution of communism. However now, the protagonists of the politicisation of art come from the West. During the first years of transition only political art was acceptable if it come from the East. At the moment, while it seems that politically engaged art is now easier to accept for the local art scene, activist art becomes on the contrary more prominent in international art circles. The transformations of the art language changed not only in the realm of the language in general, but also between language and reality. Still it is difficult to make a clear distinction between the two oppositions - the language of art about the political and the language of art that acts within the political. The paradoxes that stem out of local circumstances actually blur this basic difference. It is only recently that few artists in Slovenia: Apolonija Custeric and Tadej Pogacar, in Croatia: Andreja Kujuncic and group *Platforma*, or Tanja Ostojic started working in the realm of the political thus changing again the language of art

and thus overcoming the old feeling of abjection that resulted from ones involvement in the realm of the political.

Under the straightforward plot of modernity and postmodernity or the clear-cut opposition of pure art and engaged art, we have to recognise the original and enduring tension of those two politics of aesthetics, which are entailed in the very forms of visibility and intelligibility that make art identifiable as such to us - those two politics which are led ultimately to their own self-suppression. It is that tension which underpins and somehow undermines the seemingly simple project of a political or "critical" art that would serve politics by arousing the awareness of the forms of domination and enhancing thereby energies of resistance or rebellion. That simple project has been taken up from the beginning in the tension between the two opposite politics: art suppressing itself in order to become life and art doing politics on the condition of doing no politics at all.

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[1] Bojana Cvejic, "Jacques Ranciere: The Politics of Aesthetics". Frankfurt Summer Academy. http://theater.kein.org/node/view/99

[2] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horro. An Essay on Abjection*. New York: Columbia University Press. 1982, S. 10

[3] Ebd. S. 2.

[4] Slavoj Zizek, "Why are Laibach and NSK not Fascists?" Originally published in M'ARS (Ljubljana: *Moderna Galerija*), vol. 3/4.

[5] http://www.nskstate.com/appendix/articles/whyarelaibach.php

[6] Ibid.

[7] One example of such a question, answered ambiguously is from the interview of Laibach given to the Slovenian magazine *Mladina*. *Mladina*: My final question: are you Fascists or not? *Laibach*: Isn't it evident? http://www.ljudmila.org/embassy/3a/exc/l3.htm The most provocative interview is still the one from 1983 given for the State TV News programme where the members of *Laibach* band were dressed in uniforms: http://www.nskstate.com/laibach/interviews/
laibach-interviews.php

[8] Zampa di Leone, "In the Arse of the Balkan 2000-2005". http://www.various-euro.com