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To criticize, charge for services rendered, and be thanked

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There are several reasons why it is interesting to try to deliberate on the relationship between institutions, institutional critique, artistic production, self-organisation and social critique within the dynamics of the Croatian artistic and cultural scene. From the end of the sixties onwards we can trace a distinct line within this scene that, while searching for alternative means of production and presentation of the artwork, has redefined the status of art and modes of mediation between artist and audience. It has achieved this by asking radical questions about the 'autonomy' of the system of museums and galleries and about the role and operation of societal institutions. This way it has inaugurated a participative, collectivist model of operation with a tactical deployment of media. Although a great number of authors from this stream were critical of the cultural institutions, no examples can be found within the activities of the so-called *New Artistic Practice*[1] of institutional critique similar to that in the West.[2]

Whilst the 'first wave' of the practice of institutional critique[3] in the seventies included systematic research into how the system of

museums and galleries functions by repudiating its neutrality and accent on the suppressed market, economic and political context, the critical work of the artists in the region of former Yugoslavia during this period was not directly focused on the system of museums and galleries. Rather, it was directed at the political and ideological context, as well as the issue of directly creating a more autonomous system of production and distribution of art.

Although institutionalised critique is not a fully operational and sufficient term when trying to evaluate the status of contemporary artistic practices and complex, often contradictory issues that such practices address, the repercussions of the assimilation of institutional, and broadly speaking artistic, critique will be one of the starting points for investigating the relationships between artistic positions, critical practices and a spectrum of problems related to their institutionalisation.

When speaking about the specifics of a single cultural scene, such as Croatian, touching upon its attitude towards the wider meta-narrative of art history is unavoidable. However, this text does not aim to focus solely on the acute question of the canonisation of Eastern European art into a 'universal system' of Western art, but to first and foremost try to sketch the contours of different forms of critical practices, their critique of existing institutions, the formation of new institutional forms and processes of institutionalisation, from a local perspective marred by 'problems with institutions'.

Originally initiated within conceptual art, the practice of institutional critique has affirmed a site specific approach, in which the very space of realisation assumes vital importance, as it is itself viewed as a complex, heterogeneous cultural and political place, framed by the institutions of art, suffused by contradictions and

suppressed tensions. Parallel to the broadening of the fields and languages of art, the redefinition of artwork, alterations of artistic conventions and the distribution of roles in the art world, the institutional frame has also experienced its own trials and transformations. It has proven to be not only an ossified structure but also a dynamic frame prone to reconfigurations, adaptations and continuous redefinitions.

Inevitable points of reference for the different hybrid forms of contemporary artistic practices include the heritage of feminist art, a series of anti-commercial artistic approaches developed throughout the sixties and seventies that accentuated the context of a certain location and related it to the conditions of production, presentation and the reception of art, as well as different public art practices focused on activism and social issues, and the community based projects developed throughout the eighties. All of these have also greatly contributed to the redefinitions of the artistic framework.

The tension and complex dynamics between the artistic critique of cultural institutions (which necessarily implicitly or explicitly includes the critique of social institutions) on the one hand, and the institutional encouragement of artistic practices on the other, have resulted in contradictory, ambivalent effects. These effects encourage and dumb down the potential for critical action at the same time.

Whether the ‘defensive’ institutional mechanisms worked towards assimilation, censorship or ignoring the critical practices, it was precisely the dynamic between artistic production and the way the institutions reacted to it that formed the contours of the variable ‘love and hate’ relationship that characterises the modes of the

complex constellation of cultural institutions and artistic production.

By drawing on analyses of the hegemony of flexible capitalism, whose problems she investigated in cooperation with Luc Boltanski ("Le Nouvel esprit du capitalisme / New Sprit of Capitalism", 1999),, when writing about the crisis of concepts of critical positions, Eve Chiapello contextualises the fact that criticism increasingly fails to fulfil its social functions, only *prima facie* paradoxically, into the area of its efficiency. Cooptation of critical potentials into the dominant economic discourse of neo-management is one of the most prominent signs of the exhaustion of critical practices. "In many respects, one might say that neo-management practices are the result of paying careful attention to the complaints articulated by 'artist critique'. In short, it is precisely the success of 'artist critique' that has led to its being co-opted by its adversary and losing so much of its poignancy".[4]

Historically situated in the 19th century as one of the forms of resistances to the new industrial, capitalist and bourgeois society, the term 'artist critique' is used as the umbrella term that implicitly includes different forms of critical social aspirations and which, unlike numerous related terms, accentuates the fact that the artistic position and the values that the respective lifestyle embodies detaches itself from its surroundings by pointing out the seemingly immanent differences between artistic creativity and the imperative of profit.[5]

Although the practice of institutional critique has, of course, moved far away from the romantic or modernist ideal of the 'hero artist', it has also affirmed a new type of criticism. Different self-defining potentials of critical positions in relation to the art system

and beyond have resulted in the modification of the existing paradigm and far more fluid role assignments.

The modification of the paradigm of authorship on the wave of the redefinition of key concepts of the ideology of modernism, in which individual creation and the concept of the artist as genius are replaced by various forms of collective and participative work, has resulted in the shift such that, in the words of Charles Harrison, "...the death of the artist as the author was the birth of the artist as the self-curator – proprietor and protector of an always-consistent, always-unmistakable logo.

The artist now aspires to reverse the roles of connoisseur and author, treasuring the artificial authenticity as the author who is extracted from the creative consumer".[6]

This dynamic is reflected not only in the change of paradigm within the configuration of relationships between artist and institution, but also in the placing of curatorial practice into the modified paradigm. The adoption of managerial functions by the artists so as to affect the system as directly as possible and in a maximally self-defining way, have been accompanied by parallel aspirations on the part of cultural institutions and curators to assume critical and authorial positions.

Increasingly fluid role assignments and the increasingly unstable status of belonging both inside and outside the institutions have resulted in both sides acting 'parasitically' on each other, as well as the adoption of critical discourse and the art system. This has resulted in an ambivalent situation: just as the facilitation, mediation and institutional organisation does not lie solely in the hands of the curators or institutional administration, so a critical position is not a 'privilege' related solely to artistic positions. One

of the important changes indirectly caused in the contemporary context by artistic critical activities is the catalysis of the increasing appearance of innovative models of curatorial practice, as well as the
appearance of the whole new 'creative class' of cultural workers.

In relation to the said dynamics, in the contemporary Croatian context one can speak of a kind of relevant cultural continuity. The activities of the earlier generations, primarily related to the field of arts, have lately been intensified through the phenomenon of a self-organised and extra-institutional scene that is not strictly related to arts. Due to its progressive potential, however, it does focus on cooperation and social engagement, assimilating this heritage as the initial cultural capital, whilst redefining the issue of the production of critical discourse and critical positions.

Whilst the dulling of the critical edge within the institutional context of the (former) West is a side effect of the assimilation of critical practices, the related critical phenomena in the Croatian context are still not a part of the 'official' narratives of the local art history. This is the case primarily because of the focus on identity-based cultural politics and the dysfunctional operation of the central official institutions whose (in)activities have for decades been inertial and have actively ignored the needs of the local scene.

The systematic lack of institutional engagement in the field of museum collections, theoretical interpretations, archives and the knowledge-base concerning contemporary art has brought about the appearance of numerous flexible initiatives (based on NGO-type organisations) that have started constructing various hybrid micro-institutional forms.

In the constellation of two equally problematic models of traditional institutions - the conservative, dysfunctional, nationally oriented model, and its antipode in the form of the populist, global ideal of the 'enterprise' cultural institution in the making - we can follow the emergence of new cultural protagonists over the last seven years. These are informal, self-organised, networked organisations, whose gradual institutionalisation takes place in the unstable and oscillating conditions of institutional 'interspaces'. Alongside this, within the international context, the neo-avant-garde and conceptual artistic practice of the sixties and seventies is recognised and integrated. But like the activities of the recent self-organised cultural scene, the experiences of the previous generation on the local level are still not institutionally evaluated and recognised as relevant.

Although internationally recognised artists, such as Sanja Iveković or Mladen Stilinović, for example, are by no means dissidents within their own milieu, just as the numerous 'microinstitutions' do not function in the so-called space of alternative culture, the fact remains that the local cultural institutions do not construct their identity on critical experiences. Whilst in the West the emancipative potentials of critical practices are being built into the constitution of artistic institutions, thus contributing involuntarily to the process of the formation of cultural influences and the hegemony of a certain norm, the related tendencies in the local context have first and foremost encouraged the creation of the 'parallel system' of cultural action and the circulation of art.

The seventies in Croatia were marked by the artists who took a politically active and critical artistic stance and whose activities often included a large number of participants, functioning as 'autonomous spaces' parallel to the art system. The existing system was thus indirectly criticised, almost as a side effect of the creation

of a more autonomous mode of artistic production and distribution.

Although exhibiting in the public and alternative spaces did not represent a confrontation with the galleries, but was an outcome of a desire to directly communicate with the surroundings, this kind of strategy was in fact an implicit, and yet bitter, critique of the institutions and a clear reflection of the need to realise the political potential of art in the specific timeframe and social context out of which the given artwork arose. This was preferred to the several years it would probably take to include the given artwork in the official institutional system.[7] Alongside the implicit criticism of the institutions, the critical dimension of this generation's activities is most clearly expressed in the confrontation with the ideology and drastic merging of the public and the private. Even the simple gesture of selecting the artwork material can function as a critique of the artistic and social system. The artist Goran Trbuljak decided to take as his work material a simple sheet of paper that anyone can buy in a stationery shop, and which he takes to represent the "... largest and most fitting format reflecting my status, societal conditions and the situation I live in."[8] In confrontations with the framework of museum institution the artists, as a rule, do not size up their opponent, but question their own artistic position within the system with plenty of strategic irony.

One of the earliest examples is the 1969 spontaneous action by Goran Trbuljak in which the artist "from time to time displays his finger without the management's knowledge"[9] through an existing hole in the door of the Modern Gallery in Zagreb. The artists of this generation, however, went to even greater lengths in social critique through confronting the ideological apparatus in the context of public space. The key example is the *Triangle* performance by Sanja Iveković, in which the artist, during

president Tito's official visit on 10th May 1979, simulated masturbation on her balcony as the presidential motorcade moved down the street below. After a few minutes a policeman from the official security detail interrupted 'the performance' saying "all objects and persons must be removed from the balcony". The 1972 *Referendum* action by Goran Trbuljak also subscribed to the ideology critique: the artist performed the action in a city centre street, stopping random pedestrians and asking them to fill in a ballot answering whether or not Goran Trbuljak (who was not well known at the time) is an "artist".

The common ground of these and other artists, such as *Group of Six Artists* or Antonio Gotovac Lauer (a.k.a. Tomislav Gotovac, whose radical performances and provocative artistic expressions in public space have often been interrupted by the police) is the testing of the boundaries of public space within the socialist state and its repressive mechanisms. We are left with an impression that the contemporary system did not pay much attention to what was going on in the contemporary art scene, regarding it as marginal in relation to e. g. film, literature or public memorial sculpture, which were recognised as representative and influential means of artistic expression.

The system within which this art circle implemented their projects was part of a project of a social state, inclusive of the institutions willing to exhibit without censorship, but rarely encouraging or producing them. This created fertile ground for the development of conceptual, 'non-expensive' art and the ideas of creating 'artistic communities' clustered around self-organised spaces or smaller galleries, which in turn lead to the rise of alternative spaces for the production, exhibition and distribution of artwork.

Both phenomena described above – the artistic activities of the seventies and the recent forms of self-organised critical practices – can be interpreted as two waves of collectivity, which have positioned themselves, though in different social and political circumstances and with different aspirations, in relation to the official institutions. Numerous experiences of collective action in the culture and art of the Eastern European countries have resulted in 'parallel universes' and affirmations of different aspects of the collective work. But it would be wrong to interpret their continuity as an inherent, 'atavistic' property of the post-communist societies.

Although the opposition between the 'official' and the 'unofficial' artistic system is not as sharply polarised in the case of socialist Yugoslavia as in the case of the countries of the Eastern block, within the Croatian scene it is possible to follow the continuity of the development and co-existence of the parallel culture systems from the late sixties and seventies to the present day. The conception of art and its role in society is drastically stratified and disjointed in these parallel systems. Though what is at stake is a conflict of visions, as well as (eventually) of drastically different versions of history and art history, this tension did not result in a 'culture war', as might have been expected, but in a more or less 'peaceful coexistence' of both concepts of culture.

The independent culture scene has been equated with so-called 'alternative' culture for decades, but the term 'alternative' is not entirely functional in the present conditions. Although the self-organised scene represents a rare visible alternative to repressive cultural policies with a national slant one the one hand, and the neoliberal market on the other, this is by no means an 'alternative' culture or subculture. For instead of becoming integrated into mainstream culture, the alternative culture developed throughout the seventies and the eighties has undergone a sudden

disintegration in the nineties. The ethnocentric and nationalistic climate of the time threatened and suppressed different forms of critical action. The development of civil society in Croatia has been hampered by the fact that the parliamentary act concerning NGOs was adopted as late as 1997, and its restrictions revised only in 2001. It was at this later stage that reduced bureaucratic procedures for the registration of formal collectives (NGOs) encouraged their widespread formation.[10]

A large part of the recent cultural production comes from the hybrid 'progressive international mainstream', which discusses the open local issues that emerge around specific infrastructural, locational and relational coordinates. Clustered around confrontation with the dominant models of representation and the parallel development of innovative models of cultural policy and inter-disciplinary cooperation, this scene has peaked in the last few years in terms of collaboration.

Although these self-established organisations sprang up all over Croatia, the activities of the scene remain particularly intense in Zagreb.[11] The key role in the case of the Zagreb scene has been played by two 'spin-offs' of the *Open Society Institute Croatia* projects: the establishment of the *CDU – Centre for Drama Art* in 1995 and the *Multimedia Institute mi2* in 1999. These have become the key protagonists and active participants in the second phase of the development of the cultural scene. Ever since 2000 one can observe the rapid increase in the number of collaborative organisations, mutually networked and working on the transformation and articulation of a series of problems related to the institutional framework through cooperative programmes and examining cultural policy and the status of public space.

By developing a profile of spatial and activist practices that cover various aspects of contemporary culture, the most prominent initiatives on the scene include: *Zagreb Culture Kapital 3000* (CK3000), *Clubture* and *The Right to the City*. The *Clubture* network assembles independent cultural organisations from Croatia and acts as a programmatic and cooperative platform aiming to develop innovative cultural policies. *Zagreb Culture Kapital 3000* (CK3000) was formed in 2003 as a long-term and intensive cooperative platform of independent cultural organisations, whose members are: *Shadow Casters*, *BLOK* (*Local Base for the Culture Refreshment*), *CDU* (*Centre for Drama Art*), *Community Art*, *Kontejner* (*Bureau for Contemporary Artistic Practice*), *Multimedia Institute – mi2*, *Platforma 9.81* and *What, How and For Whom/ WHW*. *CK3000* has developed a series of cooperative projects in different formats and sparked numerous smaller projects and initiatives.

To take an example, the *Operation: City* project was initiated within the *CK3000* platform and implemented in 2005 inside the abandoned *Badel – Gorica* factory in Zagreb. It included activities by about thirty cultural organisations, which indirectly raised the issue of the status and transformation of the city's spatial resources. These intertwined initiatives and activities were an indirect overture for the *The Right to the City* initiative. It was formed in 2006 with the intent to stop the devastation of public spaces threatened by neoliberal interests and populist politics. The initiative uses different tactical means: public campaigns, discussions, petitions and protests, making their activities an example of citizen participation in the creation of public policy and development of the city.[12]

The creation of a public, urban and also symbolic space of articulation, endangered by neoliberal and national interests, is the

central problem around which the scene has consolidated. By adopting a position counter to the representational models of the local dominant culture and generally marked by the establishment of different forms of continuity eroded by the break in the nineties, the recent self-organised cultural scene was formed as an indirect reaction to the dysfunctional, inadequate and uninventive operation of the existing institutions. In a way, this basically frustrating situation has catalysed the achievement of the goals of the self-organised scene. But many entrapments and dangers lie hidden in the hitherto parallel existence of two institutional systems.

The key issue is one of survival: can the scene activated in recent years, although very prominent, survive by acting within extremely precarious and generally inhospitable conditions? Although its actions are, on the whole, systematically treated as an excess, exposed to constant dangers of disappearance, insufficient infrastructure and pressures of hyper-production (in order to provide for basic survival), its recent reception is somewhat improved, primarily through growing international recognition. The survival issue is at the same time one of change, redefining the existing institutions and securing the continuity and freedom of operation of the 'institutions in the making'.

Whether this kind of more progressive system of cultural production on the local scene will have a chance to develop its full potential is questionable.

The artist Mladen Stilinović, who worked within the informal *Group of Six Authors* from 1975 to 1979, a group that introduced the genre of the 'action-exhibition', once pointed out that the foundational difference between the collectives and groups of the seventies and the contemporary ones is a different economy of joy in collective work and a different level of bureaucratisation. The

former place of enjoyment is replaced today by the attempts to construct effective administration for it. Whilst the collective bodies of the past naturally dissolved as the joy of collaboration declined, the challenge faced by collectives today is the lure of their own institutionalisation.

The given two waves of collective action were not presented so as to demonstrate the flow of influence, but on the contrary, in order to accentuate the correlated emancipating desire to continue a certain kind of artistic and social experiment in radically altered circumstances. Whilst in the recent years one can witness the sudden termination of smaller progressive institutions in the West, in the case of the situation whose dynamics we have been tracing in the rough outline of the so-called artistic or cultural critique above, the topical issue is how to continue. That is, how to continue to develop the spaces for critical articulation and self-representation that goes beyond the suffocating co-existence of the nineteenth century nationally focused models of cultural institutions and their neoliberal equivalents.

The key contribution of the recent self-organised scene to the problem of survival - as well as the dissolution - of certain institutional forms is not only the burning question of its own self-institutionalisation, but also of the transformation of the conditions that necessarily push for the abandonment of the narrow boundaries and demands of individual professions. Although it might seem inappropriate to raise these conditions in the context of the confinements of the art world, the critical action of the expanded artistic field itself continually raises the open issues and the necessity of their further elaboration. It is clear there are no unambiguous and universal answers, clear formulae, preset and ready-made models that can be followed in this case.

The processes of articulation and redefinition include raising the issue of the status of public space, the actualisation of the collective past and attempts of an alternative interpretation of it. The burning issues and tasks before self-organisation do not become their own purpose, but what we have before us is an unfinished process, loaded with risky uncertainties, nevertheless maintaining the awareness that there are no 'innocent positions'.

Regardless of the different outcomes and potential solutions for the presently fully exhausted existing forms of operation, one of the 'morals' of the critical practices in the local context states that the social and cultural institutions are not 'God-given' fortresses, but fragile constructs full of inconsistencies, susceptible to change and modification. Different forms of self-organised action in culture that have swamped the Croatian scene in recent years are an inseparable part of the dynamics of the previous decades. Although the assimilation of the demands of the late sixties and seventies, caught in the "distorting mirror of a new hegemony"[13], is undoubtedly the key moment for formation of this critical scene as well, it is also one of the potential sources of its internal inconsistencies.

Without being exhausted solely in their own 'critical narcissism', the key issue is not how to resist the neoliberal effects that it cannot control and within the scenarios of which it often plays - or tries to avoid - its pre-assigned roles, but in what ways its activities can, within the institutional platform, contribute to the more effective criticism of the mechanisms of neoliberalism and the consequences that lay scattered behind them.

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[1] *New artistic practice* is the collective title for several activities within Yugoslavian art in the late sixties and throughout the seventies, which were oriented in different directions. These encompass conceptual and post-conceptual phenomena and several authorial approaches. *New Artistic Practice* represents a radical turn with respect to the preceding artistic practice, and the innovative approach presupposes the specific social and critical artistic engagement.

[2] The concepts of East and West are employed conditionally, as 'provisional' terms that fall under the context of the former Cold War geopolitics in which 'West' covers the countries of Western Europe and the USA.

[3] In the works of Michael Asher, Daniel Buren or Hans Haacke and many others.

[4] Eve Chiapello: "Evolution and Co-optatation, The 'Artist Critique' of Management and Capitalism", Third Text, Volume 18, Issue 6, November 2004, p. 585

[5] ibid.

[6] Charles Harrison: "Essays on Art & Language", The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England, 2001, p. 94

[7] "New Art of the Seventies", *TV Gallery*, RTB television production, 1983. Edited by Dunja Blažević.

[8] Ana Dević and Sabina Sabolović, "Conversation with Goran Trbuljak, Sanja Iveković and Tomislav Gotovac", *Zarez*, March 2003.

[9] Goran Trbuljak, exhibition catalogue, Contemporary Art Gallery, Zagreb, 1973, non-paginated.

[10] A group of new organisations appeared in the mid-nineties, the activities of which can be viewed from the present perspective simultaneously as the beginnings of the current network of organisations and also as a continuation of alternative culture, but in a significantly altered social context and a field of operation that questions the very concept of alternative culture. The key influences have come from initiatives such as the *Anti-war Campaign Croatia*, a pop-political magazine *Arkzin*, *ATTACK*, *FAKI* festival, and a series of organisations with a feminist, environmental and anarchic orientation.

[11] For example, some of the earliest examples of the self-established cultural institutions are the *ARL Lazareti* workshop from Dubrovnik (founded in 1988) and *Labin Art Express of Labin* (est. in 1991).

[12] The dynamics of the self-organised cultural scene in Zagreb is a summary of a more extensive exposition in Dea Vidovic's article "Development of Croatian Independent Cultural Scene (1990-2002), or all that precedes the Clubture network", in *Clubture, Culture as a process of exchange 2002-2007*, Clubture: Zagreb, 2007.

[13] Brian Holmes, "The Flexible Personality", *Hieroglyphics of the Future*, Arkzin & WHW, Zagreb, 2003, p. 109