**The Artist Is (Not) Present**

Harsh and dark in register, this year’s exhibition *Critics Have Chosen* has a jovial paraphrase hanging over it of the title of the globally known great Marina Abramović’ retrospective, held at the New York Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in 2010, when she – during two and a half months – spent more than 700 hours in “silent dialogue” with the audience. For decades, the presence, or non-presence, in other words, the two-way process of acceptance and rejection, has been taking place between our environment and the personality and work of Marina Abramović, forming a mythical, Raschomonian, Gordian knot. The latent issue of whether this environment has been rejecting Marina or Marina this environment, is being intensified now, as the countdown is slowly beginning to her large come-back exhibition, scheduled at the Belgrade Museum of Contemporary Art for the end of summer 2019. And this issue, just like waiting for Godot, does not really need to be resolved.

And in order to embark to considering the (non)presence of artists on our scene, i.e., the problem of (dis)continuity, to start witk, we are going quarter of a century back.

The exhibition *Critics Have Chosen* had for many years been conceived as a reflection about the previous year from the aspects of three critics. In January 1994, three art historians presented their choices: Milanka Todić, Darka Radosavljević and myself. Each choice consisted of works by three authors. Aleksandar Davić, Stanislav Šarp and Fia group, and Aleksandar Kujučev were Milanka Todić’s choice that year. Darka Radosavljević selected works by Talent, Saša Marković Mikrob and Škart Group. The artists who were my choice were Dejan Anđelković and Jelica Radovanović, Peđa Nešković and Igor Stepančić. This compilation of views marked the prominent points of the visual scene of that, unusual and gloomy, year of 1993, which was in the middle of the sandwich, between the imposing of the sanctions to Yugoslavia and the Dayton Agreement.

And it was in the first sentence of the short accompanying text for that exhibition, in December 1993, that I noted: “This is the time of a fast flow and change of events and single-layer (dis)information, whose progressive rhythm leads to atrophy of memory and of the sense of continuity, to the loss of concentration and a growing mental disorder”. Intuitively – yes, but by the apparatus of reason, I certainly did not see the dimensions of discontinuity, that is, the breakdown, which would mark the coming period of our cultural scene.

Working on the exhibition *Critics Have Chosen 2019*, from a historical distance of 25 years, I wanted to start from a “case study", from reminding of this exhibition, which has left little record: a black and white catalogue and a randomly found VHS recording of a 3K TV report on it. I have devoted the entire exhibition project of *Critics Have Chosen 2019* to exploring the (non)presence of artists on our scene, i.e., the problem of (dis)continuity. There is a series of causes of the (non)presence of artists: emigration, escapism, self-isolation, resignation, concern about the mere existence and the struggle for survival, physical death. On the sample of the choice of (not)present artists, this exhibition creates an imaginary, potential map of the current art scene.

Let’s start from the Anđelković & Radovanović, Nešković, Stepančić triad, who were my choice quarter of a century ago.

Dejan Anđelković and Jelica Radovanović, uncompromisingly present, fostering the freedom of expression and the attitude of non-acceptance, wavered through time with their widespread artistic activities. In 2011 their dispersive art practice was well covered in a monograph (Vujičić Collection Fund) with a commentary by art historian Jasmina Čubrilo, which made their entire activity more visible, comprehensible and understandable.

For more than five decades, between the interchanging phases of resignedness and the tendency to bring awareness to the ubiquitous, deeply rooted small-town spirit and build a platform for overcoming it, Peđa Nešković has been persistently exploring flea markets and artefacts of our everyday life, having a firm foothold in his atelier at Staro sajmište, as one of the last artists surviving there.

Igor Stepančić disappears from and reappears on the scene in quite unexpected places, meanders, and, in every new appearance, he surprises us with the freshness, innovativeness, and complexity of expression. With his project, designed specifically for the context of this exhibition, he accentuates, in a radical and innovative way, the position of artists in the local gallery/museum system and media space.

All four authors, regardless of their visibility or nonvisibility on the scene, have always been deeply immersed in the art flows, focused on live interaction and dialogue with the social environment, with found objects and ambients.

One of the key figures of the Belgrade art scene in the 80’s and 90’s of the 20th century, Miomir Grujić Fleka, imprinted a strong personal mark on the local art scene. He died in 2003 and has since lived in urban legends. A recent exhibition in Šabac, and giving of his name to a city passage in that town, renewed the interest in his work. A monograph is being prepared, but also an exhibition, at the Belgrade Museum of Contemporary Art, which should make the legends of Fleka tangible.

Milovan Destil Marković was one of the key figures on Belgrade art scene in the 80s. The year of 1986 was a turning point in his life. He won the prestigious Politika Award for Painting then, as the youngest laureate in its history. In that year he exhibited at the Venice Biennale and moved to Berlin, where he lives today. The painting *What Is to Be Done?* *Occupy*. displayed at this exhibition, was made in 2012 as part of Marković’s first presentation at the City Gallery in Požega, where he lived to his majority age. This very painting was at the centre of a scandal in the beginning of 2018. Immediately after the turbulent abolition of the Cultural Centre in Požega, the President of the Municipal Assembly of this city characterized a series of works by contemporary artists, which were under the roof of this institution due to the Ministry of Culture’s purchase, as politically unsuitable and inappropriate. Marković’s painting *What Is to Be Done? Occupy!* from the *Barcoded* *Paintings* Series was particularly singled out.

With his paintings and drawings, his scenes of inner life, where the self-portrait is interweaved with the elements of psychedelia, comics, the fantastic, underground, but also with escapist accents, Stevan Markuš has left a strong mark in the iconosphere of the 90s. In the mid 1990s, together with Uroš Đurić, he founded the artist group Autonomists, which advocated for new figurative art inspired by comics, film and advertising design. He was one of the winners of the 35th October Salon Award in 1994. Soon he disappeared from the scene. He makes drawings. He very seldom exhibits.

Jusuf Hadžifejzović is one of the most important figures of the Yugoslav art scene of the 80’s. He lived in Sarajevo, studied in Belgrade and Düsseldorf. He conceived Yugoslav Documents. After a series of monumental depotgraphies that he has performed around the world in recent years, moving between Sarajevo, Antwerp and Korea, he „opens“ his Voids Shop, where he sells marked disposable packagings of all kinds of things. “And so, under the control of the artist and in accordance with the principles of free market, the world of void is growing. It’s impossible to talk about something that does not exist. But void exists. It exists in nonexistence... Jusuf’s marking and decorating of void is the art of the future” – wrote Miljenko Jergović in Jutarnji list a few months ago.

When speaking about the position and visibility of visual artists, the position of Dejan Atanacković is paradigmatic. It is an author who has been living and working between Florence and Belgrade for more than two decades, and who is present at the local art and public scene through a number of convincing exhibitions but also through international projects in the domain of education and inclusion. The exhibition *Selected Works 2003-2014*, held at the National Museum in Kraljevo in 2014, provided a comprehensive insight into his work. But despite all the activity on the scene, he gained wider recognition and visibility only in the beginning of 2018, when his literary debut was awarded the NIN Prize.

In his visual and literary research, Atanacković relies heavily on anthropological evidence, as is the case with digital photomontages based on archival material from the Anthropological Museum in Florence. In fact, the duality of Atanacković’s (non)visibility on the local art/literary scene appears as a local anthropological constant.

In the second episode of the second season of the auteur television project *Way to the Future*, titled *Nostalgia*, the director Boris Miljković, in his own unique, subjective way, examines the feeling of displacement from the domicile environment. He starts from Tarkovsky; talks with Alexander Genis in New York; in Amsterdam, he recognizes the traces of Marina Abramović, who once, having left Belgrade, settled there, but also talks with her in a car riding through Belgrade boulevards. In the city where she is and is not present. Last summer, during the preparations for her exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, scheduled for the end of the summer of 2019, Boris and I made a documentary film about the return of Marina Abramović to Belgrade.

This exhibition is an attempt to map the underground, invisible streams on a terrain similar to the calcareous soil, where water masses, after a powerful above-ground flowing, suddenly percolate, form some kind of hidden accumulations and paths, and then, miles away, appear unexpectedly and continue their above-ground flow, to disappear again and, not visible, continue their lives. This exhibition seeks to answer the question – what would have happened if all these, but also many other, creative energies had had their regular flow?

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