

Group Terms, DSC, spring 2010.

## Contextual art in the countries of Eastern Europe: Approaches, diagnoses and treatments of the problems

In this text we address the phenomenon of contextual art in the countries of Eastern Europe today and its possible predecessors in the socially engaged art of the socialist realism. By pursuing the contextual approach to art in Eastern Europe, we confront it with the colonial concept of contextual art, as conceived by Paul Ardenne in the West. From György Lukács' notion of "reflection", via the transitional and post-transitional socially engaged art of the 1990s, our focus is the present situation and assessment of the artistic action as intervention in the social context. Though our topic is the contextual art in Eastern Europe, the emphasis is on the perspective of Serbia and the region of former Yugoslavia, with corresponding examples from artistic practice cited in the footnotes.

Artistic tradition of the modern European (Western) societies, from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards, was based on an intuitivist approach, derived from romanticist and expressionist theories of the genius, accounting for art as self-expression of a gifted individual's exceptionality. Foundations of such conception of art were addressed by Giorgio Agamben, who wrote that since the 18<sup>th</sup>, and especially throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the philosophical notion of praxis transformed.<sup>1</sup> Praxis came to

1// Giorgio Agamben, The Man Without Content, Stanford University Press, Stanford Ca, 1999, notably the essays: "Poiesis and Praxis", in Ibid., pp. 68-94, and "Privation Is Like a Face", in Ibid., pp. 59-68.

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be conceived as 'expression of the will' of an individual, and art itself was increasingly being defined as practice, and less as poiesis. Such approach is characteristic for the modern, developed and democratic societies. They are determined by the ideology of individualism and attitudes towards the relative autonomy of art, whose social function may include a total absence of a social function. Auto-expression or reflection of the will of the gifted individual becomes per se a sufficient reason for his actions, namely: it may be the sole purpose of his creative output.

In the later half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, after the World War Two, Europe was divided into the (capitalist) West and (communist/socialist) East, which contributed to further divergences in the theoretical development of such approach to (and understanding of) art. The capitalist countries pursued this ideological-theoretical pattern. Capitalism manipulates art while conceiving its discursive realms, setting the price for an artwork. The author's genius is observed as a market value. It is, therefore, sufficient to be recognized as a gifted individual; as a genius whose talent translates into specific units that may be expressed in numeric, that is, monetary terms – as an equivalent of all other values.

It would be erroneous to approach the artistic tradition of Western Europe as a binary opposite to the values of art of the European East. Their "base" is common; the "superstructure" differs, due to differing social orders and social-political contexts wherein, in the later half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, authors from the socialist and communist countries conceived their work.

Western ideology of individualism confronts collectivism as the key notion associated with the societies shaped by socialist ideology. In socialism, a gifted individual operates within a context prone to interpretations of his work through the discourse of "social totality", while the ideal of "socially beneficial" art becomes a specific criterion for assessing the importance of an artwork. An instance of this is György Lukács' "theory of reflection", repeatedly emphasizing the category of typicality<sup>2</sup>. According to Lukács, typicality is a sum total of the dominant phenomena and relations in the particular time, representing as such an important feature of art meant to reflect an

2// Derđ Lukač, Estetičke ideje: za marksističku estetiku, BIGZ, Belgrade, 1979.

objective reality. Lukács confronts such art to that which renders images of individual experience of reality in individual's consciousness. In broader terms, in socialist countries, the mission of art was to reflect the society through projections of its future (and past).<sup>3</sup> In such contexts, an artist was being recognized as gifted if his work had a powerful social resonance; if it emancipated or educated the masses; if it communicated a relevant and straightforward message (instruction) of an ideological nature.

Against this social and conceptual background, the artists from the Eastern European countries developed a strong sense for structural thought, as opposed to intuitive and individualistic one – and thus, at the same time, a sense for social engagement of art. Structural thought implied a re-examining of the position of art and artists in the society, bringing about socially engaged art in the times of soc-realist affirmation of the new social order and, in excess, a problematic and critical art emerging (e.g.) with the new artistic practices in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) in the 1970s. Soc-realism was not the only form of artistic practice in the Cold War Eastern Europe. For example, another major paradigm was the moderate modernism in SFRY, largely converging with the Western art. However, this is not our present concern.

With the cessation of the Cold War and relieving of the divide of Europe resulting in the fall of the Berlin Wall, since the 1990s there had been some radical turns in the countries of the former Eastern block. In a transition from the socialist and communist into capitalist social orders, the dominant ideologies in those countries have changed. However, a critical-contextual approach and reflection remains an important feature of contemporary art in the countries of the former Eastern block. Engaged art of the 1990s in Eastern Europe was marked by the campaigns for civic freedoms, human rights and positive values of democracy, and in the case of Serbia, additionally and critically charged against the nationalist regime.<sup>4</sup> However, in the present dec-

3// Note, for example, the large soc-realist canvases by the painter Boža Ilić, or the Yugoslav Partisan Cinema of the 1950s or 1970s.

4// In Eastern Europe in the 1990s, and notably in the countries of former Yugoslavia, the artists were additionally encouraged to take such an approach by the Soros centres for contemporary art as the main commissioner, and in the case of Serbia, the sole infrastructure for production and 'distribution' of contemporary art.

ade, instead of projections of a democratic future, we are facing the cruel actuality of the transition – demise of the communist ideology of collectivism, privatization of public assets, 'primary' accumulation of capital, mass unemployment etc. – and the critical blade of the artistic practices turns to those and similar issues.

What is characteristic for the contextual approach is that artist's motivation does not progress from within towards the outside. It commences outside, grows in the subject's consciousness, from where it again goes out, into the street, into the society, into the reality it came from. The artist's intention is not to express and reveal his individual, inner state to the society – even one directly caused by the surrounding reality; his aim is to affect the society pinpointing a common social issue.<sup>5</sup>

This could be a problem concerning the artist personally, but not a problem concerning him solely. In other words, the artist is not perceived as an individual whose inner, "intimate landscapes" are worth exposing as such, but as an individual advocating a certain social stance, speaking on its behalf, or claiming its voice. Similarly to Lukács' theory of reflection, the object of contextual art is currently not the personal, but the typical. Individual reflection may function only as an addend in a computing operation whose sum total is an expression of the common. The common-social, namely: collective. The artist is the intervening social subject and the purpose of his creation is not to express himself (his inner depths) but to "change the world", to affect the value, ideological and other dominant systems he recognizes in his creative environment, namely: in the context he intervenes into.

The artist is not a lonesome figure, but an aware and conscious individual who discovers a background for his actions in the social reality. In this context, the artist is not a genius. He is rather an 'engineer' and his task is to suggest correct guidelines for construction of a collective future. Art has no autonomy. Artists have no autonomy. Art is a social practice, and artists – social subjects.

5// We find examples for such an approach in: Tanja Ostojčić's project "Looking for a husband with an EU passport", Vladimir Nikolić's "Rhythm", Dušan Murić's "I'm pro: spam", Igor Štromajer and Davide Grassi's "Problemmarket"; in design actions by the Škart group etc.



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Such conception of contextual art is essentially different from the one advocated by Paul Ardenne.<sup>6</sup> Writing on contextual art from a position of a Western-European theorist, Ardenne defines the notion of reality as an “assortment of events the artist may borrow from” and, subsequently, as a “playground for exploration claimed by the contextual artist”. In the countries of the former Eastern block, reality is not a playground claimed by the artist, but the only available ground for setting the rules of his game, the only ground of his very existence. If under the socialist regime the rules of the game were known in advance and determined by the dominant ideology, today they are confusing, new and unclear: the role of the artist is to clarify them or try to redefine and adapt them to the needs of the society forced to play on that ground.<sup>7</sup>

¶ Ardenne terms contextual art the art of the found world, whereas the countries of the former Eastern block still search for their own “world”: the world that had been lost; the world whose reflection was meant to be the future projected by the art of soc-realism – namely, the world whose future never came true.

¶ Therefore, in those countries, contextual art should be observed notably as an “intra-social practice”. The contextual artist acts in the society on its behalf, transgressing the border between himself and his audience. What determines his position as an artist is awareness of the social context, namely: his social consciousness. However, it is important to make a distinction between the notion of social consciousness in the art of soc-realism, and the same notion in the discourse of contemporary contextual art in the countries of the former Eastern block. Soc-realist art was commissioned by the state and may, accordingly, be observed in terms of “ideological state apparatuses”, as defined by Louis Althusser.<sup>8</sup> Contrary to this ‘programmatic’ contextual

6// Pol Arden, Kontekstualna umetnost: umetničko stvaranje u urbanoj sredini, u situaciji, intervencija, učestvovanje, IK Kiša-Muzej savremene umetnosti Vojvodine, Novi Sad, 2007, pp. 38-42. (Paul Ardenne, Un Art contextuel: Création artistique en milieu urbain, en situation, d'intervention, de participation, Flammarion, 2002)

7// Instances of redefinition and reclaiming the public space: TKH Platform's TV performance “SMS Guerilla”, the projects “Lilly” and “Tempo” by Danilo Prnjat, “Raspeani Skopjani”, Horkeškart's early performances, Ana Miljanić's production “Listen, Little Man” as part of the project Lust for Life (CZKD) etc.

8// Luj Altiser, Za Marksa (For Marx), Nolit, Belgrade, 1971; Luj Altiser, Elementi samokritike (Elements of Self-Criticism), BIGZ, Belgrade, 1975; see also Louis Althusser, “Ide-

collectivism, contemporary art complies to the so-called bottom-up or grass-root principles, in response to the systems of the state pursuing the neo-liberal capitalist order and re-affirmation of individualism resulting in imposed principles of competition at all social instances. In the past, social consciousness of the artist was perceived as a value advocated by the dominant ideology and ruling social order, with a view to their affirmation. Today, this notion is associated with a critical approach, characteristic for the so-called independent, alternative scenes, whose role is, to the contrary, to question the social order.<sup>9</sup>

Consequently, the critical-contextual approach may be observed as an important characteristic of the contemporary artistic thought in the Eastern European countries, where the notion of social consciousness, in a way, historically evolved. In the years of transition it had transformed, nevertheless retaining its basic postulates of approach to art and its position in the society. Indeed, those postulates changed a direction: the ethical dimension, sense of collectivism and notion of art as an instrument of social progress remain, with a difference that they no longer represent the dominant regime, but criticize it. Political and social changes affecting the Eastern European societies brought about changes of the dominant value systems. Thus, the prevailing ideological and aesthetic patterns of Leftist provenience changed sides in the times of rising capitalism, becoming alternative.

¶ Therefore, on one level, we may address contemporary contextual art of Eastern Europe in terms of search for new forms of collectivism or new aspects of pursuing social justice. For a contextual artist, the society is not merely a space for artistic intervention. At the same time, it is a cause for the inner state demanding an intervention. Context is, consequently, a cause for action and playground of action. “Personal is political” and vice versa.

¶ In such an order the artwork assumes a (social, political) mission, claiming an active contextual impact. Such approach demands a strong sense of the context and structural reflection. It commences with perceiving the problems or deficiencies within the existing context,

ology and Ideological State Apparatuses”, in Mapping Ideology, Slavoj Žižek (ed.), Verso, London-New York, 1995, pp. 100-141.

9// Instances of bottom-up initiatives include Belgrade's “Other Scene”, Zagreb-based “Operacija: grad” (Operation: City) and “Pravo na grad” (Right to a City), Nikolina Pristaš and Ivana Ivković's performance “Protest” etc.



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raising questions in turn on what to do and how to react in order to transform it.<sup>10</sup>

To set straight the deficiencies of a context, it is necessary to challenge its basic postulates and (tacit) consensuses. In that sense, a critical-contextual approach always implies a particular “dissensus”, allowing for a sharp critique of the context. Critique is, nevertheless, the start but not the end point of conceiving a contextual-intervening artistic act, as the very need for intervention indicates a desire, necessity, demand of a new context, or even a clear vision of a different one. This vision needs not necessarily be a vision of the better, but it always starts from the need for change. It is, therefore, a vision of the different. The artist as an intervening social subject is not obliged to know exactly what kind of a change he wants, as many artworks based on such principles demonstrate to us. His desire to change the context might not be an illustration of a program, manifesto or a political proclamation of a new society, for in the complex contemporary social realm (no longer informed as a whole, as would be previously effected by the master narrative of the communist ideology) there is a consciousness on the part of the artist that he cannot precisely anticipate the consequences of his intervention. The critical-contextual approach to art may accordingly remain in the frameworks of clear dissent, of statements on what one doesn’t want; of attempts to suspend laws, even temporarily, in order to test new ones.

Sharp critique of the dominant regime is a starting point for contextual art. It builds upon it, as long as this attitude does not become an end in itself. At this point we reach the main problem associated with this artistic approach.

It may easily become – and often does – a cynical, pessimist and unproductive phenomenon of “parasitism on the negative”<sup>11</sup>, rendering the intervening subject passive. He identifies with detachment from the

10// Examples of “systematic” interventions into the cultural-artistic context: Marina Gržinić’s theoretical and artistic work, actions and projects launched by the TkH Platform and TkH Magazine, Prelom magazine and collective, the project and the gallery Kontekst, Per-art and “Indigo Dance Projekat” by Saša Asentić (and Ana Vujanović).

11// Bojana Cvejić’s notion may be observed as a definition of one of the problems of our local context, and in turn as a launching pad for a critical-contextual artistic intervention into that context.



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context, perverse pleasures of constant negations, and exclusivity of his position of an apatride.

The opposite of this position is the one assumed by artivism. The activist approach is active and affirmative. It starts from dissent and critique of the existing, and focuses on the change bound to happen, conceiving the artistic act as a tool for attaining a goal. The goal is the change, here and now.<sup>12</sup>

We may conclude that a pronounced critique of the context, followed by a detailed analysis of its mechanisms, relations of power and their effects, underlies each critical-contextual artistic action. It begins with diagnosing a particular social problem: however – in medical terms – we might add that a correct diagnosis does not necessarily imply the right therapy and the ultimate cure. Diagnosing is important, but not sufficient. Namely: a clear articulation of a problem is merely the starting point in the process of its solving. The problem and its correct definition operate as topics, but not as concepts for an interventionist artistic act. The problem is the trigger, but not the target.

Therefore, in art conceived with a critical-contextual approach, one should distinguish the works disclosing the problem in its context<sup>13</sup> from those displaying intention to actively affect the context. This difference equals a difference between representation (implying that the purpose of a particular artistic act is to render a certain problem visible), and investment (fr. l'enjeu) in the sense outlined by Althusser.<sup>14</sup> According to Althusser, the intervening subject – observed from the perspective of post-humanist theories, beginning with structuralism, and especially in the context of the poststructuralist materialist theory (therefore as a product and effect of different texts and their intersections) – cannot objectively grasp the totality of a society. Nevertheless, he can invest himself into it, thus subjecting himself to cri-

12// Some activist groups include: Žene na delu (Women at Work), Queer Beograd, Stani pani kolektiv, Zluradi paradj, E8 group etc.

13// This approach features in the works by Vladan Jeremić; “Gypsies and Dogs” by Zoran Todorović; slam performances by the Drama Mental Studio (Jelena and Milena Bogavac); The Monument Group; project “Janez Janša”; Ana Miljanić’s production “Bordel ratnika” based on the anthropological study by Ivan Čolović etc.

14// Luj Altisen, Za Marksa (For Marx), Nolit, Belgrade, 1971; Luj Altisen, Elementi samokritike (Elements of Self-Criticism), BIGZ, Belgrade, 1975.



tique and self-critique which activates the process of change, directs it, but demands responsibility of the subject to the change.

¶ The artist must be 'aware'; his social position is a position of a subject aware of the complexity of the situation in the society.

¶ Conscience and awareness additionally demand responsibility, and the notion of responsibility indeed implies an ethical dimension. Consequently, a question is raised: do only those affected by a problem have the right to concern themselves with it? ... Instead of answering this question, we may cite examples from practice of the numerous artists who performed their interventions in contexts they never belonged in. This especially applies to various artistic practices concerned with marginal groups and identities.<sup>15</sup> Although the ethical dimension of these works may be debatable, the artist's right to intervene in any context is taken for granted – keeping in mind the premise that context is a public property.

¶ The context never belongs to an individual, regardless of the level of his identification with it (whether he feels as a victim or an accomplice). His comfortable unchallenging of his own position does not necessarily imply obedience: however, it has the same effects as tacit acceptance of the existing order in a certain context.

¶ Thus the critical-contextual, interventionist art approaches the notion of solidarity and suggests a conclusion that the context is ever changing, not because of a single person, but because of us all. Each artistic contextual intervention multiplies social confrontations, opening new possibilities for plurality. This plurality is not smooth and unchallenging (as the postmodernist "anything goes"): it raises the criteria, questions the dominant values, and creates a social climate providing a discursive space for multitude of, often dissonant, voices.

15// E.g. the artworks and actions aiming at integration of marginalized social groups, like the ethnic, religious, sexual or other minorities: the poor, parentless children, victims of violence, medical patients or persons with special needs. Such artistic practices feature in the so-called inclusive theatre, forum theatre and the works conceived in workshops and adult education trainings. This group additionally includes all the practices which may be labelled as community art, and the works thematizing the position of marginal groups and identities, rendering their problems visible for the rest of the society. The examples also comprise numerous documentary films and videos whose content explicitly addresses the socially marginal.



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