

DECODING

Contemporary Art in Bosnia and Herzegovina
The National Museum of Montenegro, Cetinje

The Angel We Are Wrestling With

If you want to get to the exact idea, it is important to move aside in thinking.

Henri Poincaré

Reading *Stories and Studies of Strange Things* by Lafcadio Hearn (Koizumi Jakumo), I came across a story that significantly stands out and is entitled *Question in Zen Texts*. This is a short story into which you are introduced by two friends (who are talking about the story and asking questions); they are giving you a stimulus while suggesting reflection at the same time but not giving any explanation. The plot of the story is taking place in Hanyang, where a man named Chang-Qian lived. Through the story we get to know his daughter Qing, who is endowed with unparalleled beauty. Once, as a joke, Chang-Qian told his nephew Wang Chow, that Qing is his future wife. A man in a high position proposed to her when Qing came of age to get married. The news deeply affected Wang Chow so he decided to leave Hanyang. He went to his boat and decided to go to up the river; however, when he heard Qing's voice behind him, he helped her embark on the boat and they went away together. They lived happily for the next six years and had two children. At one point, as Qing was longing for her family they returned to Hanyang. Because of her previous flight and fear of condemnation of her family Wang Chow went alone to her father and saw that a motionless Qing was lying in his house. Chang-Qian then said to him that Qing fell into bed and stayed motionless the moment Wang Chow left Hanyang. Confused by the situation they both went to Wang Chow's boat where the runaway Qing was waiting for them on the deck. Father Chang-Qian was visibly taken aback by the event so the three of them went to Qian's home. Having seen each other both the girls Qing started to hug each other. At this point they merged and since then there exists only one girl Qing. After having read the story a question arose among the friends: In the case of separation of the spirit of the girl Qing, which was the true Qing? Here, I would like to quote one of the friends, who said: "If you manage to figure out who was the real Qing, then you will learn that the transition from one cocoon to another is just the same as is the traveller changing pubs along the road." In further conversation of the two friends a materialist question is asked: "What happened with their clothes? Did their clothes also blend as both Qing girls did?" – Such a question has no relevance from a Buddhist point of view, as the personality of the girl Qing should be the object of our attention, the other friend replied. - But that still does not answer my question,

said the first one. “The best answer is”, said the other one, “not to reply”. – “How so?” said the first one. “It is because such a thing as personality – does not exist.”¹

Can we say then that contemporary art as well as art theory are in a similar situation? It is very difficult for today’s theory to explain contemporary art practice in a proper way, since it involves the appearance of new interventions, installations in space, a different evaluation and construction of perception as well as expanded definitions of contemporary art. Today, problems within art are related to the question of reality, space, time as well as to a different consideration of the issue of what can be a work of art? Is it possible that our reality is independent of ourselves or we, as subjects, shape it through our existence? If we talk about the works of art which we are surrounded by, we basically experience them through their materiality and visibility, thus pointing to something that involves not only the senses but also our thinking abilities. Certainly it can be said that art is marked in some way by time and society in which it was created, although it also managed to overcome them. The question we ask the visual culture today is turned to its portrayal of our broken reality and to how art is able to represent the kind of communication in which freedom played the most important role while not succumbing to any rules, except its own. What do we recognize as art today?

The Age of Enlightenment and its idea has launched a radical reconstruction of the world. Renaissance art has anticipated this view by establishing basic rules of perspective by the mid-fifteenth century, led by Leon Battista Alberti and Filippo Brunelleschi thus paving the logic of views to the present day. Presenting the world through linear perspective meant the following: 1) the mechanistic control over the universe as a fully self-intertwined totality; 2) a general acceptance that in every phenomenon, as an external form, there exists internal regularity; and 3) the essential uncertainty which argues that understanding originates from the *independence of the viewer’s perspective*.²

The loss of linear perspective in art during the nineteenth century, its gradual disappearance in the events related to the avant-garde³ of the twentieth century and the emergence of conceptual art during the second half of the twentieth century suggests a crisis in art theory and the scientificultural model of interpretation, in an attempt to communicate something about its understanding of reality and the way we see or create. The entire artistic production of the twentieth century expanded artwork into an artistic expression and entered life itself, turning it into a concept of art. The artwork is no longer relying just on static quality. The eye, as a basic sense that absorbs visual art which comes from the eye and speaks to the eye, is questioned in this area given its previous role in the very comprehension of the world and experience of the artwork. The eye ceases looking at the world as a settled fact.

The disappearance of the recognition of the visible world, that is, the disappearance of mimesis in the twentieth century painting is the crucial event that definitely makes a distinction between the twentieth century painting and the art of painting that could be called *traditional*, i.e. the earlier art of painting. The early twentieth century avant-garde promotes not only a new way of painting but also a new concept and essence of art, inclining to the cognitive as the genuine in art.

The basic situation set by the twentieth century avant-garde is the result of the crisis of the nineteenth century Romanticism, Impressionism and Post-Impressionism. The demand for actual

1 Lafcadio Hearn, *Stories and Studies of Strange Things*, SJD Beograd-Tokio, Beograd, 2013., p. 95-101

2 Chris Jenks, *Visual Culture*, Jasenski i Turk, Zagreb, 2002, p. 15

3 Avant-garde poetics are presented as models of the privileged cognition of reality and as moments of destruction of the hierarchical structure of the individual and the society, Vattimo Gianni, *The End of Modernity*, Bratstvo-jedinstvo, Novi Sad, 1991, p.55

autonomy of art is manifested in the creation of pure forms. In the essence of understanding the art by Nadežda Čačinović is the following: “Art will not feed you but it does not have to justify itself because it is directly related to transcendence pure forms (and here we come to a conceptual and practical overlap). The rhetoric of purity refers to a higher reality so that manifestos and messages that are part of the art production in the twentieth century, speak of the brave minority that passes through degrees of revelation and achieves the absolute truth.”⁴

Contemporary art bases its progress on such foundations, thus being perceived *as the happening of the world* and not as the (former) presentation. This perception conceives the very *constitution* of an artwork as an artwork and not just its production, whereby it becomes an important factor in the artistic process. The described condition fits the best in with what Y. Michaud calls *gaseous art* and finds its place in the mixing of cultures. Thus art becomes the ether of life and by transforming into a gaseous state it enters all its pores.

So, art collected and understood itself in the omnipresent aestheticization of reality, so it is necessary to recognize it as a separate sphere of reality that is, at the same time, different from that same reality. Problems arising from such perceptions are exactly the conflicting reality of art itself. The question that arises is the following: Is art in the *object* which embodies the idea or is it in the very *idea*? Artworks do not have that well-known reference to self-intelligibility of presenting reality, but they tend to produce special experiences, thereby questioning themselves and their function while actually keeping a distance from reality.

When we talk about the works by Borjana Mrdja, Radenko Milak and Miodrag Manojlovic we see that their works are based on examining the subject, trying to adequately explain its role in a given system of values. We can say that one of the tasks of today’s artists is the development of critical discourse with no coincidence that could support terms that are relevant today in project exhibitions which just require a response to the key words. What is called fundamental within art is the event that cannot be explained by the key words system. With this approach, in exchange for a leisurely central location or hub that does not exist any more, the viewer is also forced to deal with the new system which annuls allegory, narrative or the distorting mirror of parody, where humour crashes the previous stable systems of value. This field of action seeks a kind of articulation which Edward Said called the empty spaces between things, words, idea.⁵

In the works by Borjana Mrdja one can perceive the absence of subject (*Artists at Work*) and the very form of the clothing that was until recently worn by some of the persons (*Decorative Selves*). That clothing is not lost, as in the story about Qing, but it shows us some stereotypes that occur in our surroundings. Those are highly visible stereotypes that clearly show us the condition as well as the moment in which the subject is situated (whether it is uniformity or a kind of relaxation that is visible at night time). On the other hand, in the work *Unfinished Stories* by Radenko Milak we observe a diligent repeating of the same sequence that is taken out of the film language. If we talk about the movie, each cadre is carefully chosen and it was taken into account that it has its place in the further development of the movie’s story. That movie story is cut out from Milak’s work and instead of it there appears a simulation which is repeated. In such repeating the cadre loses the meaning it had in the film language but in the visual presentation it obtains a different connotation. Here we cannot speak about copying once and again the same cadre but we have the appearance of simulacrum. Here we have a reconsideration of the art of representation and a major shift towards simulation - towards a mass-production of paintings (watercolours, in the case of Milak) where the links to the original (as well as with the reference to one of the movies) are exceptionally weakened. When it comes to the work by Miodrag Manojlovic I always think of Ernest Renan saying: *When I think I have the impression that I am the author of the dialogue between the two hemispheres of my*

4 Čačinović, Nadežda, *Zagonetka umjetnosti (The Riddle of Art)*, Demetra, Zagreb, 2003, p. 12

5 See more in: Edward Said, *Abecedarium culturae: structuralism, absence, writing*, TriQuarterly, 1971, p. 33-71

brain. Today, this definition would not be well accepted by psychologists but that separation is very important at the moment of the creation and initiation of the *event*. This can clearly be applied to Manojlovic's works since a very clear line of thinking can be seen – a line that led to the culmination and performing of a series of drawings initiated through the series *Storyboard* which today have their own reality that somewhat scares us. This is a very significant transformation that creates a totally different surrounding for the viewer. When I talk about the surrounding I primarily have in mind the watching of Manojlovic's drawings which place the viewer before many problems. Apart from perceiving the course of thinking, you are slowly drawn into his way of thinking and your thoughts become mixed up. In other words, your thoughts become someone else's thoughts. This would not be so strange if we thought about this as about someone else's thoughts but gradually you start thinking as if those were your own thoughts. Here Denis Diderot can help us when saying: *My ideas are my whores*. In other words, you can think about Manojlovic's works as of your own but in reality they nonetheless remain just the author's thoughts.

With Vidovic you can notice a basic dealing with the problem of painting which has changed significantly during the last fifty years. A particular symbolism or search for a new masterpiece is not required, as it had been the case up to then, but an attempt is made to get by in a time where art is no longer at the top of the symbolic system of culture and is only a part of such a system. We have passed from one romanticised system to a completely different multicultural world, postcolonial, consumerist, producible and generalized where Great Art has become worn out. When you find yourself at a crossroads where it is about breakups, ends, promotions, crucial works and when you comprehend the other extreme of experiences that follow the modernist sequence of forms and tendencies, then your role as an artist becomes highly questionable. In other words, it acquires its true meaning only in terms of meeting and mixing with new cultures. In the emerging art system Vidovic manages to connect his work *Chevy 6000 cc* with the previous minimalist stream, but in a new form. He manages to avoid the spectacular that is inherent to the painting, as well as to resist the simulacrum paintings and to be persuasive, along the way, in his emphasis on the physical presence of here and now. Vidovic strives to achieve Jameson's *eclipse, finally, of all depth* where he insists on the exterior, i.e. the superficiality of contemporary representations and experiences achieved. A different idea which tells us more about the direct mastering of space, as well as about its physical takeover can be seen in the work *Operation The New Gallery (Calgary)* by Mladen Miljanovic. The work resulted from the series *Attacks*, in which the artist deliberately uses military strategy in the sense of a definitive occupancy (occupying) of art spaces. The tactics and manoeuvres that are known to us since childhood receive a different meaning when placed in the context of the gallery space. Instead of terrestrial maps with a charted field of possible actions and currently occupied targets, in front of us we have a plan of art institutions that seem unconquerable for the local artistic corpus. Miljanovic likes to play around with the artistic experience, with all that surrounds and makes the contemporary scene today. It is a scene that the individual yearns for, where everything is under control and reduced to excesses that only enhance the newly created nice experience. It is a world in which everything is gliding weightlessly. That hedonism becomes a place of stimulus and impetus for Miljanovic. In other words, the time of art has to be the time of the event. *Operation The New Gallery (Calgary)* is one of those events. It is a kind of a game (war or art game) which contains a number of players, as well as a number of decisions that must be made in accordance with the game. There occur certain situations and consequences of newly created decisions that do not have to be clearly displayable ... When you look at the work, you can see it is classified as most board games and that it is *a game of complete information*. The game has its direction and a specific ending that can be victory or defeat. It all depends on the further moves of the players, artists and institutions. The whole procedure consists in a transit to the horizontal⁶ mode; a place is chosen, the given culture is explored (the project is

6 The horizontal and vertical mode was set up by Hal Foster in his book *The Return of the Real*. The horizontal mode is a synchronic move from one to another social issue, while the vertical mode is a diachronic inclusion into disciplinary forms of a given genre or media.

started), the project is completed and one moves over to a new fighting position which re-establishes the cycle.

When talking about game, victory and defeat, about glory and death there appears the work *In Front of the House of Asterion* by Nenad Malešević. Relying on the short story by Jorge Luis Borges *The House of Asterion* Malešević retains a moment of life on his photographs, attempting thus to prevent death which is the only inevitable thing and which eventually welcomes us. Malešević wants to witness the inability of human change and doing anything for themselves. The photographs are a note on an obscure landscape of a part of the forest that is divided by the river Neretva. It is a meeting place of the human attempt to change the natural environment by placing the wartime bunker of the Yugoslav People's Army Supreme Headquarters, the former Army of Yugoslavia. Today the place is devastated and is used for artistic purposes. The place seems to be saying the sentence from the story: *It is true that I do not leave my house, but it is also true that its doors (which are innumerable) are open day and night to man and animal alike. Anyone who wishes may enter*⁷. This kind of place is somehow based on fiction and illusion. Maybe it cannot be a true reality, as Borges himself sees reality as a metaphor which he uses for building a brand new, unseen world of his own. This is much like former Yugoslavia, which has remained only in the imagination in all the newly created countries, as a place that does not exist and that has never existed. Through his work Malešević delivers us a dose of documented reality, one which is very difficult to understand and believe in.

Veso Sovilj also examines the space which is the negation, the space which symbolically makes a prologue to death or determines the line of life. In the works *Balance and Danger* we can notice a critical view of the traditional form of expression, where gesture and colour on a flat surface are cancelled. Sovilj's work *Ode to Painting* is a black ribbon which directly introduces us to his method of demarcation with the past. It is as if a scream can be heard: *The art of easel painting is dying with the civil option*, one of the more famous slogans chanted during the Russian avant-garde. Sovilj continues to wipe out the past through his actions, in this case, his past as a painter, a sad symbol of the intellectual milieu in the time of eternal transition. On the other hand, Sovilj assumes that the other side, the professor (and his colleagues), is this joyful symbol of success. Both roles can be found in Sovilj - there is Sovilj *the painter-artist* on one side while on the other side is Sovilj *the professor*. Through his actions and installations the artist is attempting to make a balance and keep up with life. *Balance* is that important place where the moment appears, *because a moment just lasts and everything else is obviously irrelevant ... and disappearing*. That moment holds the content of what Art today is. In other words, on one side we have art as part of the cultural sector of aesthetic ornamentation, while on the other side there is a subliminal way of the social existence of man. Sovilj warns us of the *Danger*, where we witness that culture is transforming into a biopolitical set consisting of genetic technology, global capitalism and the spectacle of the visual world.

At a time when everything can be declared a work of art, unless art is not mere nothingness and deception, although sometimes it is, there still remains its role of an ornament, marking or showing identity (as in the story about Qing). Ninoslav Kovacević is playing about with the old and so often exalted features: intellectual, political, religious, formal and symbolic. Speaking about today's art there remains experience in it and those experiences are an impulse for new visions. In his installations *Ornament and Installation with Yellow-Black Glasses*, which were created by collecting plastic glasses left over from certain celebrations, exhibitions, parties⁸ we see a well thought out use of the consumerist way of thinking and creating the redundant, something that has no basis in the permanent or sacred and profane. In other words, Kovacević's installations come up

7 Borges J., Short Stories, *The House of Asterion*, Reč i misao, Beograd, 1979

8 See more in: http://zanavukicevic.blogspot.com/2014_05_01_archive.html

from two conditions: the condition of deficiency and the condition of excess.⁹ The installation is sufficient to only open up the space in which the author is somewhat disappearing. He is present only through the feature of his own disappearance. This also occurred with the glasses, an integral part of the entire installation, which were at some previous exhibitions, crushed and destroyed, cancelled after the action. Kovacevic does so much as to find the point in which life - action takes place (the moment before stepping on glasses and destructing the integrity of the installation), which can be linked to a conflict that took place in the thirteenth century between the Roman Curia and the Franciscan order, where the theological canon of consumption as the impossibility of use was established. On one hand the Franciscans proclaimed the possibility of use (*usus facti, de facto use*) and on the other hand John XXII issued *Ad Conditorem Canonum* which discusses things as objects of consumption, where use is strictly separated from property, because it is completely solved in the act of consumption, i.e. in the process of destruction of these things (*abusus*).¹⁰ It is interesting how John XXII sets the foundations of the paradigm of the impossibility of use, which peaked in the present time: "The very act of use itself exists in nature neither before being exercised nor while exercised nor after being exercised. In fact, consumption, even in the act in which it is exercised, is always in the past or the future and, as such, cannot be said to exist in nature, but only in memory or in anticipation. Therefore, it cannot be had but in the instant of its disappearance."

The impossibility of use has found its place inside the Museum. It is the place where the truthful and valuable is kept and where art possesses and expresses its value. On the other hand, we have consumers who are unhappy and it is not only because they consume objects that have incorporated within themselves their own inability to be used, but because they believe they are exercising their right to property on these objects, because they have become incapable of profaning them, according to Giorgio Agamben. By using things we consume them. In other words, the imagination is at its strongest where something is awaited for and weaker when we start using something.

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9 The object is either cancelled, withdrawn from the Presence by its self-destruction or expelled from the field of its appearance. See more in: Badiou Alain, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, Naklada Jesenski i Turk, Zagreb, 2001, p. 49-59

10 Consumption which inevitably destroys the thing is nothing but the inability or negation of things which assumes that the substance of things remains intact (*salva rei substantia*). See more in: Agamben Giorgio, *Profanations*, Rende, Beograd, 2010, p. 83-10