

Memory of Recent AVANGARDA¹, Does it Spell 'Resistance'?

Nina Živančević

It is interesting to notice that wherever I lived, I have always felt as a refugee: an artist in an inner, as much as an outer exile. True, no one has ever forced me to leave my homeland, former Yugoslavia as I had left it out of my own free will that distant 1980. I was neither Nabokov, nor Joseph Brodsky or Soljenitsyn. However, the merciless hand of High Capitalism has also ruled my country, our schools and our artists and intellectuals and all of us have felt its rude consequences even under the reign of Tito. As I'm walking among the sleepy bodies of the Syrian refugees in a Belgrade's bus station park, trying to address all my human and performative efforts towards the Other, my whole life appears suddenly on a stretcher in front of my eyes, and here comes a question: have I ever left this place where my grandmother founded the Serbian branch of the Red Cross, and where my grandfather was hiding the Bakuninists under his roof, on their way from Russia to the United States? Here, questions such as "Is art still possible?" and "what is its current, 'disappearing' form?", have never occurred to me, nor the questions about the true meaning of resistance or its absence or presence in everyone's life. The answers to these questions would impose themselves on me quite naturally. Let me dig into some fitting examples of the artistic practices that will help to illustrate my quandary.

In a specific procedure of combining the modeled and "already-made" elements pertinent to his work, a sculptor, Zoran Joksimović combines a porcelain leg, a bath-tub and machine oil to form a sculpture (*I Remember*) which uses abjectness as a self-reflective act of a traumatic memory exploring its effects in a material and metaphorical image of a fragmented body. (Sretenović, *The Journey Through the Pictures and the Phantasms of the 1990s*) Was it Hal Foster who, discussing the "abject art" was also discussing the "vulnerability of our borders, the fragility of the spatial distinction between our exterior and the interior, bringing the concept of self into a crisis through the cut of the dismantled body whose chopped off member now independently follows its own 'game of chess,' towards its own path of disappearance instead of the subject. However, may we conclude that such a traumatic cut is productive because it evacuates and raises the subject, showing us that the totality is an illusion which does not hold in practice or that confirms its existence only in multiplicity, in a dynamic interaction of the whole and its segments?

I hesitate to say that the whole He-story of the so-called recent Eastern European art could be interpreted as an extended metaphor for

the question which we have raised above here, however, some of its most illustrious representatives, the most resilient and the bravest ones, certainly attest to its existence, to the acts of humanity and inhumanity to which this art has responded at the very end of the 20th and the very beginning of this 21st century.

Let me take a look at a certain She-story: Before the Matthew Akers film with Marina Abramović entitled *The Artist is Present* (2013) there was *Balkan Baroque* (1999), a film by Pierre Coulibeuf where Marina, as the artist, was not present. As if her body remained in her filmed performance *Biography*, but her mind was certainly elsewhere, recovering from the political events in her homeland which happened during the 1990s. In the latter film, at a certain point she is laying in her white bed, her head covered with the snow of memories as she is asking a panicky question “And Neša? What is happening with Neša?”² This profound worry for a fellow-artist, friend, cousin and the big Other, who stayed in the ‘Inner Exile’ reflected the traumatic cut which remained an unhealed wound in the body of the artists who left Tito’s Yugoslavia during the 1980s. Soon after, many of us were forced into the political exile during the Milošević’s “Serbian reign of terror” which stretched during the 1990s when the only sane artistic activities could be brought under the common denominators of political, subversive art and resistance. Many of the artists, writers, performers, film-makers, musicians and composers had transferred their bodies to the new, welcoming countries but their “head,” that is their spirit remained in their homeland, among the bombshells and under the acid rains formed by the broken uranium bombs.

I left Serbia in the beginning of the 1980s but I left my family, thus a part of my body, in Serbia where my nephew, Dragan Živančević, became a co-founder (with Nikola Džafo) of the most virulent resistance art group, LEDArt who performed numerous radical social actions, events and performances against Milošević’s regime in the 1990s.³

In my “Outer Exile,” I was accompanied by a good crowd of fellow-artists who shared my daily dread in the very heart of neoliberalism. As a performance and poetry editor to the legendary *East Village Eye* (1982-1985) I encountered numerous examples of artistic courage and resistance to the last stages of High Capitalism in its revolting agony. The gallery space had become too small to house the expression of these deeply cutting historic times which made artists turn to the theatrical, thus showing their yearning for the brutal and the real that had paved the ‘street’ which accordingly became a new installational space for the artistic happening, event and action.

Dragan Ilić, Vesna Golubović and their Fashion Moda graffiti people were turning the city into their technological playground; Vesna Victoria, Zoran Grebenarović, myself, we were giving our post-punk performances “out on a limb,” and the flower of the Yugoslav music scene—Drak, the frontman of the Glass Bead Game and Ljuba Djukić of the Electric Orgasm, together with Firči and Beške (of Dirty Green) were giving improvised concerts at the CBGB’s and in various

Brooklyn ‘dives’. The private and spiritual (as in Vlasta Volcano’s appropriations of Byzantine icons) had landed on leather jackets and became public property. Much later, in 1991, Volcano abandoned his Suprematist’s yearnings and produced “Shadows” a huge installational sculpture or the most moving testimony to the absence of the Other, exemplified in burnt truck tyres hanging from a ceiling and which evoked dead bodies in absentia, thus making all of us artists metaphorically speaking disappear in a common grave (Živančević 1994).⁴

We were all mapped out as the “Aliens,” alien citizens in New York, by a LED ART photographer, Vladimir Radojčić who took photos of 72 artists in exile, all of us with naked torsos whereas the corresponding bodies, naked from the waist to toe, were supplied in Serbia, represented by those artists who remained in the country. We all formed one body, buried in some inner or outer jail. All these actions were executed much earlier before Marina Abramović came to town, and earlier than she showed her installational work and a performance «Cleaning of the House», presented at the Venice Biennale in 1997, in Germano Celan’s pavilion as she had no right to clean the ox’s bones evoking corpses as a former Serbian artist living in Netherlands, and later in New York, therefore a displaced person sharing an artistic *non lieu* with the rest of us (Živančević, 2010).⁵

The artist with whom I shared most of the local artistic and social awareness in those heavy times is Victoria Vesna whose art has always inspired a certain melancholy of thinking as its special quality brings us back to ourselves, to the innermost house in us, the dwelling of poetry. She grew up in New York City where she attended different art schools and where she, somewhat like Abramović, has become what we call a multidisciplinary artist. One of her performances that I saw last in New York in the late 1980s was her commentary on Freud, entitled “Sometimes the cigar—is simply just a cigar.” It was an anti-racist, pro-Cuban performance. Victoria has always known how to enter the core of a certain problem by placing it into a certain ethical-political frame. The musician who left the biggest impact on her was a punk artist Alan Vega from “the Suicide” who was pushing to the extreme his idiosyncratic, political and anarchist messages on his synthesizer. Back in New York in 1985, Victoria started doing very radical performances; angry at the general devaluation and commercialisation of art and artists in the East Village, she did a performance which condemned such politics. As the gallery “12 x 12 inches” was charging the artists who would exhibit their work there with 20 dollars per hour, she entitled her performance “12x12 inches = 20 dollars.”

For Victoria Vesna the awareness of space has always been a crucial element in her art as she sees it as a natural outcome of her work. She has always worked simultaneously on paintings and sculpture, but she has continuously been concerned about the showing space that was not just decorum but the matrix of a given project. In her own, natural way she has arrived at “the ambient performance” which she considers a certain category that she developed during the

late 1980s. This specific theatrical and visual performance genre has helped her work go beyond the traditional scholarly and academic concepts which tend to burden art in general. Since the 1990s on, Victoria has been exploring a new artistic genre, an interdisciplinary section that borders on science and science fiction that is called “Nanology.” This artwork implies the creation of the multidimensional world, both imaginary and imaginative in the domain of nano technology. In the world of “nano” poetics, the art, science and technology meet in a virtual space and offer us a relational experiment that allows the public to participate and create their own reality out of the exhibited elements. And, although such an experiment is to be encountered in a physical space, the interaction between a spectator and the object changes the place in an imaginative way that invites everyone to create his own ‘Imaginary Museum.’ In her project “Bodies@Incorporated,” Vesna evokes the ethical role of a spectator/participant who ceases to be a simple viewer of an artistic and existentialist process but rather an active agent of change. Her works such as “Blue Morph” and “Water Bowls” represent a sort of existential outcry against the damage and destruction that our planet undergoes as Vesna tries to raise the desperate question, “where do we come from?” followed by the other inevitable one “where do we go from here?” The spectators are invited to watch in silence the bowls being filled with clear water, then with dirty water, then polluted with oil and petrol, then with plastic. Here a visitor is politically invited to join a virtual and futile game of the geographical and national identification – as he is asked to identify himself as an admirer of the Nile, of the Ganges or a fan of the Atlantic Ocean. This raises yet other questions that are extremely pertinent, namely as to which water do we belong to, or if we belonged to a certain water, would we find the same water in our body, the water which qualifies the essence of our being?

In one of my first performances which I gave in the early 1980s, I tried to raise a similar question which underlines the score of every humane artistic investigation: If we are to start cleaning our house and our cage from an overall influx of dirt and destruction, shouldn’t we commence doing it firstly with our planet, globally, and then slowly move into our own backyard (Živančević 1982)? Applying different artistic-philosophical and ecocritical methods which had come to us naturally, as all of us, the artists from so-called “Outer Exiles” and those who stayed in the country, in their Inner Jails, shows that we wanted to produce the worthwhile socially engaged answers to the Serbian despotic governmental orders and requests; the Frankfurt School located them outside of Germany, the Russian auteurs sort of found them in their eternal exiles, but what was happening with “Nesha”? What was happening in our homeland devastated by isolation, socio-economic troubles, and tarned by the ethical amnesia by the end of the 20th century when the wars had become virtual and quasi anonymous? In a situation when the entire social world is filled with an entropy process, that is, “collective disruption of vitality through which the energies of the vital stray into sympathy with the catastrophic, apocalyptic and violent-spectacular”

(Sloterdijk, *The Art of Philosophy: Wisdom as a Practice*), the question of the relay of orientation of the artistic subject became crucially important, for there were no longer any social guarantees of existential safety and of the purposefulness of professional activities. The most vital factors of contemporary art meant that what is usually referred to as “the mainstream” abroad functioned in Serbia as an “alternative” to the hegemonic cultural paradigm, even though its protagonists were mostly academically educated artists, with the exception of a certain number of artists who belonged to the rock and techno sub-culture, alternative social movements, the digital demo scene etc. Also, this parallel field of art represented a part of the not-so-large civil counter-public front, but being socially and politically marginalized (which is also to do with the general status of visual arts in Serbian culture), it was not exposed to repressive measures, as was the case with non-governmental organizations and the independent media, but was largely ignored and subjected to media censorship, that is, journalistic self-censorship.

Finally, numerous exponents of this scene such as Raša Todosijević, Milica Tomić, Association Apsolutno, Uroš Djurić, Tanja Ostojić, Biljana Djurdjević, Balint Szombathy, Zoran Naskovski, LED Art, Magnet, Mileta Prodanović, Mrdjan Bajić, Neša Paripović—to name but a few—at the same time achieved a considerable reputation on the international scene, but this was barely registered by the domestic cultural public, so that it did not in any way contribute to a change in their social status. In other words, the relationship between what Pierre Bourdieu calls “the symbolic capital market,” which establishes a system of purely aesthetic, non-utilitarian exchange between the artist and the recipient, and “the economic capital market,” which commodifies symbolic goods (and provides artists with a social status), was not established at all, and even the very symbolic value of this art was denied by aggressive art market brokers who promoted small-town pictorial sentimentalism and the so-called “kitsch-fantasy” (as exemplified in ‘turbo-folk’ local scene) as the dominant code of the contemporary art production.

The place of art as a locus of symbolic differentiation could be exposed to the advance of the real only in those situations when it was exteriorized in the public space as a place of direct political contestation, thereby losing the prerogative of socio-political irrelevance. What I refer to here is the symptomatic example of the arrest of the artist and political activist Nune Popović (Magnet), who defended himself before the police saying that he was an artist, whereby he unconsciously stated the premise of irrelevance (the “innocence” of an artistic act), demonstrating at the same time the evidence of a personal stake when it came to the artistic tactics of occupying the public space. And though the public sphere, owing to the activities of many groups and individuals (actionist/ ‘Situationist’ tactics of political disturbance or real sabotage by the groups like Led Art and Magnet, distribution of printed matters by

Škart group, site-specific projects by Association Apsolutno and others) represented an important domain of political statements of artists, most interventions operated on the level of the symbolic producing subversive signs without the excesses of political disturbance that would constitute a provocation of the imaginary of the regime.

What is said here for the artistic praxis and its strategies dominant in the 1990s, the most politically and overtly painful period for Serbia's recent history, unfortunately applies to the current art activities of today; after the brief reign of Djindjic's democracy, we find today the same ultra-nationalist and right-oriented government forces at work. As the result of such a situation, the very question whether the recent subversive avant-garde practices have taught anything of the emancipatory value both the social art practitioners and their public, remains still unanswered. The tendency of every society to close its doors to the so-called progress tends not to be a small negligible tendency of the contemporary world fed on austerity and greed for power. I am inclined to continue my own poetry performances as many other artists who feel that they have no place to settle but in their *perpetuum mobile*, just to go. Many of us have felt already, for decades, that we have been refugees in an art field of our own respective territories—the neoliberal world of high capitalism has been the one where the art sites host only the merchant, or a benevolent but powerful curator who has the last word in the “art game.” In such a situation, the issue of the real, geographical territory became secondary to many of us. However, many marginalized artists, be it the Eastern Europeans, the Americans, or the Palestinians, simply continue to create worlds of their own. In such a situation, I am wondering if we truly need to emphasize the term “resistance.” Does it need a new definition as a comprehensive term or have we been redefining it and coining it as we go along?

Notes

1. Here I am using the Serbo-Croatian term for the word ‘Avant Garde’ which also encompasses all the terms of the taxonomy or paradigms for recent and contemporary artists’ activities in that part of so-called Eastern Europe.

2. Neša Paripović, one of the most radical conceptual artists in Serbia who also started the New Avant Garde movement with Marina Abramović, Zoran Popović, Georgij Urkom, Raša Todosijević and Evgenija Demnievska in the Student Cultural Center in Belgrade during the 1970s, was also Marina's first husband.

3. See Led Art, Documents of times 1993-2003, Multimedijalni centar LED ART, Novi Sad (Now under the auspices of Art Klinika) and Samizdat B92, Beograd 2004. The

publication saw the light of day under Zoran Djindjić's democrat government but as the political situation has been gradually deteriorating under the present government many citizens deem the experience of the LED Art collective still extremely pertinent as they hope that it continues to develop.

4. In the last issue of the legendary Belgrade magazine devoted to the visual media which I co-edited with Jerko Denegri I tried to map out parts of the then contemporary avant-garde East Village scene including the interviews and testimonies of the East European artists inhabiting the lieu.

5. In this short study I discuss the work of the exiled women artists from former Yugoslavia as the pillars of our new and contemporary avant-garde movements. These are Ljubinka Jovanovic, Kosara Bokšan, Marina Abramović, Evgenija Demnievska, Kirila Faeh, Vesna Victoria, Vesna Bajalska, Ljubica Mrkalj, Olivera Mejcen, Selena Vicković and Jelena Mišković.

Works Cited

- The Artist is Present*. Directed by Matthew Akers and Jeff Dupre, performances by Marina Abramovic, Ulay and Klaus Biesenbach, Show of Force, 2013.
- Balkan Baroque*. Directed by Pierre Coulibeuf, performances by Marina Abramovic, Michel Butor and Paolo Canevari, Institut National de l'Audiovisuel (INA), 1999.
- Sretenović, Dejan. *The Journey Through the Pictures and the Phantasms of the 1990s*, in: *On Normality, Art in Serbia 1989-2001*, Muzej Savremene Umetnosti, 2005.
- Sloterdijk, Peter, *The Art of Philosophy: Wisdom as a Practice*, Trans. Karen Margolis. Columbia UP, 2012.
- Živančević, Nina, *East Village (1980-1990), A Decade of Postmodern and Industrial Rococo*. Moment, 1994.
- Živančević, Nina (with Michaels, Abbe and Lerner, Eric): *Our Ego of the Flowers*, (homage to Jean Genet), Jo Papp's Theater, NYC, 1982.
- Živančević, Nina, *Onze Femmes Artistes, Slaves et Nomades*, Non Lieu, 2010.