

Prejudice and Aggression are Still Present in Society

A conversation between Ukrainian and Croatian artist took place after Igor Grubić's lecture in the framework of the Visual Culture Research Center project "Kyiv International - '68 Today" at the House of Cinema in Kyiv.



MR: Let's talk about 1997 when you decided to go outside of art institutions and make artistic interventions into public space. How exactly was your gesture related to a specificity of the local art community (communities) and institutions in Zagreb?

IG: At that time we had only few galleries that were focused on the contemporary art scene, which was two or even three times smaller than it is now. Today there are many more faculties for contemporary art and a bunch of young artists are starting to work - attempting to become integrated into institutional life. Yet in that period everything was concentrated on a small community of artists. In a certain way I've been influenced by the activity of the Group of Six Artists (Croatian: Grupa šestorice autora): Vlado Martek, Mladen Stilinović and others have been participants of this group. The beginning of their artistic practice was articulated as a work in public

space. This kind of communication with the public - as a public sphere - was also interesting to me as an inspirational challenge. But I realized that this circle of artistic people tended to be really small and closed - a small group of people communicating only between themselves. That's why I started to question myself on the possibility of how art can get out from under this closed circle, and how art can start to communicate with wider publics.



MR: How close were the art communities in Zagreb and Belgrade before the Croatian-Serbian war and how did the war influence understanding and communication in the cultural sphere?

IG: I am really grateful that I had the experience of living in the 80s. It's important to understand that Yugoslavia wasn't a part of the Eastern Block controlled by the USSR. After Tito's death (1980) a certain kind of liberation happened in society and the political system more closely came to resemble Liberal or Democratic Socialism. What was happening in Yugoslavia with culture at that time was a new wave of new expression. Like nearly everywhere else around the world, it was an expression of using new media and crossing the borders of different media. New Wave in art united artists with filmmakers, musicians, writers etc. Small scenes involved collaborating and led to a broader movement. But the war in the 1990s saw the separation between big centers - Belgrade, Zagreb, Ljubljana, Sarajevo. Separation also happened on micro-levels in a way that all participants of the scenes started to become more closed within their small circles around each other. You could see artists only gathering about art, filmmakers only gathering about films. There was no movement anymore - things spread through small niches.

In such context I felt a certain need to go out in public space to communicate with a wider public, and to unite the scene in this way. For example, in 1998, I created a protest against the taxes on books ("Book into Society 22%"). The government decided to put a 22% tax on the price of books. Throughout the period of economic crisis in Croatia (post-war) salaries were really small and people couldn't afford books. Books were more expensive than in Germany, Italy, and Austria, where people were making 5 times as much. This change was something everybody could relate to and united artists of different generations. This created quite a power dynamic on the scene and in the media and caused a chain reaction. Writers and publishers started to unite among themselves; and finally, because this chain reaction was growing, the government decided to abandon the book tax. Sometimes through different sources of artistic production we can reach the goals that are important to our social life.



MR: Most of your public interventions from the cycle of “366 Liberation Rituals” made fast and very direct actions related to specific political events. Among them were your protests against the visit of George Bush to Zagreb, or collaboration with the students who demanded a right to free education. Your later work “East Side Story” has more to do with the issue of memory. You made this piece in 2006 and dedicated it to a series of violent attacks on LGBTQ pride marches that happened in 2001 and 2002. Why did you decide to work with these events through distance in time?

IG: When I started this project in 2006, an atmosphere of intolerance and tension was still present regarding Others in society. You could still see that LGBTQ people had been beaten on the streets or in the clubs. But you couldn’t see any evidence of the moment of violence in the media. The

attackers started hiding themselves. They learned that if they were filmed or photographed, they would probably be identified.

I participated in a LGBTQ pride march in Belgrade, I think it was in 2010. The Serbian government offered support to activists by forming two circles of the police who were defending them. But on the edge of the defense circles football ultras and neo-Nazis were damaging the city and attacking people. Similar attacks also happened in the Croatian town of Split in 2011.

That kind of prejudice and brutal aggression are still present in society. I am still aware that many of my LGBTQ friends are hiding their identities – especially famous persons who are active in the public sphere, for instance on television, are still hiding their gender identities. They can't have a real coming-out and defend their rights in a visible way. If this is still happening, it means fear is still present. That's why "East Side Story" is not about the past – it's about the present. The main difference from my public space works was that, in this case, I represent the documentation of the public events together with staged performance in the gallery system. I combine materials in a way that should be emotionally strong – disorienting. If you see the work and experience strong emotion, it can raise your feeling of compassion towards "the Other." Next you start to question yourself: is your responsibility towards the Other the same as it was before?

Igor Grubić "East Side Story", two-channel video, 2008

MR: In Ukraine today there are similar cases connected with attacks on LGBTQ actions and leftist or antifascist actions in public space. For the current Ukrainian government, it's important to show that they protect LGBTQ pride because international organizations observe human rights in Ukraine and these events are always in the spotlight. They try to avoid media scandal by presenting Ukraine with neo-Nazis beating people on streets. But if we take less media-covered and less well-known actions for example – many of them are attacked by the right-wing radicals and the police usually do nothing. In Croatia you have a right-wing government – yet the country recently became a member of the EU (2013), where the defense of human rights is very important. How would you comment on this contradiction?

IG: Today, in 2018, there are no more regular brutal attacks on LGBTQ pride gatherings in Croatia, even though some incidents are still happening. Two years ago somebody dropped a tear-gas bomb in the club where the pride afterparty was taking place. It was a big scandal and even conservative politicians started to talk about the defense of human rights. The government needed to act in that way because there is a certain imperative to support the minorities coming from EU parliament politicians. One month before the Istanbul Convention needed to be signed, the extreme right-wing protested but didn't succeed – the government signed it. Our right-wing government had already made "verbal contracts" with important politicians inside the EU. Through certain compromises the political atmosphere changed towards favoring human rights.

MR: Since the war started in East Ukraine, society has become very polarized: there is a division between pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian positions. I have a feeling that the polarization of Croatian society was similar in the 90s. In "East Side Story" you use footage of violent acts by the far-right

towards LGBTQ activists both in Zagreb and Belgrade. This works to underline another confrontation taking place in parallel with a conflict of Croatians and Serbs. I mean, the confrontation of conservative and emancipative values but not the territories.

IG: Yes, it's visible in the film that there is political rhetoric that is similar from the Croatian side and also from the Serbian side. Conservatives relate themselves to Ustashe, and others to Chetniks while both of them express rhetoric in phrases such "Go to another country!" When I was invited by the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade to create a site-specific work, I decided to work on these topics because I found these similarities: the problem of relation towards the Other is similar on both territories. I also realized that this is happening in all Eastern European centers: Kyiv, Moscow, Budapest, Bucharest... When I was exhibiting this work in Great Britain, one curator told me that it reminds him of certain events that happened in his youth in the British 60's, 70's and the beginning of the 80s. When I had an exhibition in Italy I heard from colleagues that there are many intellectuals who are still hiding their gender identities. Some time ago there were attacks in France, in small towns. This kind of problematic may yet be present everywhere in the world. But here in Eastern Europe it's more visible because the attacks are more brutal and violent.

MR: Some of your works are connected with the issue of monuments as traces of the socialist past. In some of "Liberation Rituals" your aim was to give monuments a political dimension and political power to again speak in a public sphere. But I found quite the opposite effect in your film "Monument" (2010-2015) where the monuments are separated from people and society. They are almost dissolved among nature and animals.

IG: I wanted monuments to speak more about their life and intimacy in a more poetic and emotional way than in previous public actions. Before the film shootings I had three different scenarios. The first scenario was about activist film. I wanted to make interviews where theoreticians and human rights activists would speak about the problem of abandoned monuments. Later I refused this idea when I started to film. The second idea came when I placed myself in front of the monuments in nature. The idea was a video essay with my voiceover commenting on the image. I even wrote a text for this video essay but then I refused this approach too and focused on the new one. When I put myself in front of these monuments and faced them, I experienced them as monoliths from Kubrick's *Odyssey*. They became so strongly monumental, so alive, that I couldn't erase this feeling and decided to follow my emotion toward them. These monuments were built due to really tragic events, and massacres that happened on those very same spots. During World War II, thousands of people were killed on those sites. The memory of these events is written in the monuments, in their forms: one looks like a feast; another like a spread wing; another one like a flower that rises into the sky. In a certain way, I started to realize that they are real characters, almost as if I were filming human beings. These monuments have been built to live forever but they are getting old. The natural elements have become more powerful than concrete. And I wanted to treat them as if they are alive, and let them speak about their everyday life.

Igor Grubić "Monument", film trailer, 2008

MR: Monuments are the witnesses but also representatives of historical memory. It appears as if in

Croatia the way of forgetting and refusing the socialist past, particularly the anti-fascist movement in WWII, is connected with abandoning monuments. In Ukraine according to so-called “decommunisation” laws many statues of Lenin and Soviet heraldic symbols were dismantled. Monuments devoted to the WWII are largely untouched by the new laws, but they face acts of anonymous vandalism from time to time. If you were to decide what to do with such heritage, what policy would you provide or support?

IG: When I started to work on film I had in mind the fact that three thousand anti-fascist monuments were destroyed during the war in Croatia in the 1990s. On the territory of ex-Yugoslavia these monuments have been perceived only as monoliths of abandoned Communist ideology and were destroyed or left to perish. The government didn't do anything to stop this because at the height of nationalistic euphoria, socialist symbols were mistakenly identified with the symbols of anti-fascism. There should be a clear difference between the pure antifascist ideas and the state-supported socialist ideology that appeared subsequently after WWII. I think the reminders of human occupation are important – these are memorials for sites of tragedy and loss (such as concentration camps). Monuments are a reminder of some heroic or tragic past event, helping us not to forget certain values like our hard-gained freedom. They also contribute to the development of empathy, in order to ensure that such horrors as massacres do not happen again.

The fact is that these are the places of the recollection of suffering of a large number of people who did not die for ideological reasons, but fought and desired freedom and a righteous and tolerant society in which the equality of all citizens would be appreciated. Long-term neglect and denial of such humanist values, and the fact that others have given their lives for them, can lead to a society that does not build and respect these values, but allows for our closest relatives or ourselves to become victims. This is the reason why I believe that disrespect for monuments, especially those that mark places of suffering, means disrespect for ourselves.

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