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The term politics is often surrounded by misunderstandings or confusion. Being political does not necessarily imply the ambition to govern or the management of socio-economic relationships. Then again, art is no less a problematic area when considered in its context. It is a distinctive and specialized discourse because it can be seen as a totality of dialectical changes in various artistic practices. From a contemporary perspective we particularly appreciate those traditions which aim at widening the prospects of communication, thus extending the art's impact within the very tissue of the social structure. The goal of building an art platform based on an open dialogue and addressing a wider audience also assumes the need for the constant reexamination of the internal structure of art itself, while constantly questioning and deconstructing established cultural values. So, it is rather the urge to respond and eventually expose the results of such an investigation which is the chief motivation behind the activities of *Kooperacija*.

Because politics is inherent in art, we believe that all art is in fact political. And because artists like all people are political beings, being apolitical is virtually impossible, especially in a society deeply divided in terms of ethnicity, religious beliefs, partisanship and violent nationalism on the rise. Due to the specific circumstances which have degraded Macedonia to the level of a populist and xenophobic authoritarianism, crucial issues such as the distribution of power, freedom of choice, censorship, the use of public space or the decentralization of cultural networks remain yet to be addressed. The general lack of confidence in democratic tools abused by Balkan politicians through aggressive marketing and systematic manipulation again elevated their status to the level of a cult of personality. Politicians are known to use art as a propaganda tool, but it is the artist who can recognize the manipulations concealed behind these strategies and is capable of exposing the workings of such mechanisms. Therefore, it becomes a responsibility to challenge these and similar issues by any means possible. In this context, art is indeed a powerful tool: it can deliver a high impact by sending a strong message while using simple means.

OUT OF THE COMMODITY! 04

EVER TRIED? EVER FAILED? NO MATTER. TRY AGAIN. FAIL AGAIN. FAIL BETTER. OR A FEW NOTES ON SHIFTS IN CURATORIAL PRACTICE 03

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The question remains though: how can art actually participate in society as an instrument of change and as such make a difference?

What are the social/ethical values underlying your approach? In what way do you see them underrepresented or violated? What are the political topics and socio/political challenges you are currently dealing with?

Space, above all, is of crucial importance. In order to express its views and re-examine established values as part of its core function in modern society, contemporary art requires a venue or a site, be it a gallery or public space. In today's Macedonia this is not an easy task due to the current state of things regarding cultural infrastructure. Having almost completely seized the political power along with the public institutions, the nationalist-conservative government in their neo-liberal aspirations began using aggressive populist methods and eventually declared war against basically any conception of pluralism or opposing thought whatsoever, including critical art. This policy further led towards a massive campaign for the revitalization of alleged traditional values. The centerpiece of this project is the radical makeover of the capital city of Skopje, which was executed in three years with astounding speed, spending an estimated half a billion Euros from the national budget and leaving the already divided society even poorer, more isolated and in an even deeper discord. Ironically, the intention of reinforcing the country's historical identity resulted in leaving the people in a limbo of confusion and utter resentment. The hijacking of public and institutional space did not leave many options for the voice of contemporary art (or any democratic tendency for that matter) to be heard. It became a necessity to declare autonomous space where art could once again be accepted as a relevant driving force in society. *Kooperacija* decided to act precisely in this gap of unclaimed territory.

It also became a priority to address specific topics which would reflect upon the paradoxes of the deviated political system. If local intellectuals and artists had anything to say about the shrewd re-interpretation of history and the seizure of the public domain, this could not be done within the established cultural institutions as they literally all are under the rigid control of the ruling "elite". The government's control of public media and the press, a corrupt judicial system, etc. have further compromised any remaining options for a democratic response. So today, many artists in Macedonia feel they must address not only questions regarding identity in the context of global capitalism, but are also burdened with the task of demystifying and deconstructing present local totalitarian narratives which seem to head towards what Zarana Papić correctly recognizes as a 'turbo fascism'.

Within its activities as an informal artists-curators initiative, *Kooperacija* proposes to address exactly these issues by trying to deconstruct dominant power narratives which are transmuted into a dangerous and regressive anti-discourse. Deliberately choosing to act independently outside the strategies of "national interest" of submissive public institutions and weakened NGOs, the artists of *Kooperacija* decided to challenge topics which they believe would help shed a light on aspects of this distortion of reality and would thus contribute to a better understanding of its origins. By organizing public exhibitions, presentations and open debates about politics in art, art criticism, public space etc. it seemed that it was something that the cultural community needed badly.

Why art?

Besides motivating the production of completely new and challenging artworks, *Kooperacija's* main strength also lies in its rather unique strategy of efficiently operating outside the perimeter of the ideologically contaminated institutional framework. Its activities are based on a nomadic principle of shifting its commitment from the center towards the margins of society where free expression and political views have now taken refuge. Since mobility and subversion in such a context become a prerogative, it is important to maintain this discourse in order for the message to become clear and vividly transparent.

Kooperacija can also be seen as an experimental model because the question often arises whether it is art at all that we are talking about. One of the reasons why *Kooperacija* is not an art collective but insists on operating as an initiative is precisely because its main function does not rely so much on one specific agenda but rather proposes various ways to tackle diverse problems in society through art founded on critical thought and concrete action. It is an idea which is free of ownership and will try to infiltrate any available pore in society uncorrupted by vulgar politics,

while challenging precisely political questions through artistic means. Perhaps this is also why Kooperacija has still resisted formalizing its presence by registering as one of the countless and ineffective non-government organizations in Macedonia and why Kooperacija still prefers to deal with the cause of totalitarianism rather than its symptoms.

Tactics

Kooperacija is based on collaboration. This is of crucial importance as it is intertwined with the actual tactics that have been implemented in our work so far. The founding of this initiative began with regrouping of several already acclaimed artists, which were frustrated with the sluggishness of the cultural institutions entombed in bureaucracy and favouring formalist, politically correct, yet boring and decorative art. It then was a question of finding an alternative space for exhibiting. The economic crisis left lots of privately owned commercial spaces like shops and office spaces vacant, so the idea arose that such temporarily available spaces could be utilized as short-term gallery locations. Think of it as pop-up galleries or event sites. The shows would last from a couple of days, sometimes even hours, up to several weeks depending on the arrangement made with the owners – no rental costs required. This approach proved to be the core of the dialogue process between the artists and the audience because it offered not only an alternative way of viewing contemporary art but it introduced a new perspective on coping with the dramatically altering urban environment which became systematically robbed of its dimension as a communal space. Through the course of nearly 2 years and 15 events, this venture has been often accomplished in rather unorthodox ways, incorporating accessible means along with the capacity to act resourcefully through visual language.

A good example of this is the exhibition *Where is Everybody?* (March, 2013). The initial idea derived from the aftermath of the brutal intervention of security forces in the Macedonian Parliament (24th December, 2012). Newest government measures proposing penalties for journalists for their critical work only added to the devastating conditions the media already suffered. *Kooperacija* were then already planning a show which would address the question about the thin line between art and politics. Searching for a suitable exhibition space, we came across an available and empty 150 sq. meter office for rent. Although the place had no electricity due to unpaid bills, *Kooperacija* deliberately decided to go on with their plan slightly amending the original concept; the show would last only for one night while each artist had to find their own way of illuminating his/her work. Of course, this condition ultimately led to the production of totally new artworks which now became site specific. Being given a map of the space, the audience would search for the works through the vast corridors while bumping into each other in total darkness – an accurate metaphor of the society we live in. The next day and same place, *Kooperacija* organized the open debate *Art and/or Politics: The Double Coding as Challenge or Paradox*.

Because politics inclines to infiltrate and control almost every aspect of society these days, *Kooperacija* believes that this could be used as an advantage point in art. Virtually anything is predestined to become a material or tool for an art work, depending on what one has to say. Of course, in such circumstances there's always something that needs to be said.

Art in the current socio-political discourse in Macedonia

In general, a basic misconception lies in the fact that critical art is seen a priori as an adversary to political agendas, therefore the paranoid urge to discredit and eliminate it as such. The conservatives and traditionalists as representatives of the tendency for the revival of already dissolved grand narratives, are still demanding to distance critical art from the public domain, reducing it to the symbolic and controlling it as such within the walls of official galleries and museums that are part of the state apparatus. Besides the government's attempt to suppress the media, there is also the burning issue of censorship of artworks. Although, paradoxically this could be seen as a good thing because it shows that art can actually hit a nerve, when exposed individually, artists still remain vulnerable and are subject to a degree of pressure. Working collectively can somewhat buffer these obstructions. For example, in May 2012, *Kooperacija* acted out as a concerned voice through their own channels condemning the destruction of a public artwork made by two of its members. The cry for justice was picked up by the media in the country and abroad and thrust back at the local authorities accusing them of breaching constitutional rights, which they later reluctantly admitted. This was a huge step for an art initiative which just got started.

The relation of ex-Yugoslavian countries and the European Union. What does this mean for your artistic practice?

A lot has changed in the course of the last 20 years. Each country is now coping with authentically different issues and their relations to the EU also vary in this respect. For Macedonia, the EU has become an unreachable goal, a promised land of opportunities and unfulfilled desires, a kind of utopia really. The EU is being used as an excuse for local political manipulation, leading to a total stagnation and is further used as an excuse for various internal problems. There are many indications that this society is not capable of critically dealing with the present and this is perhaps the main reason which makes us captives of the historical nebulas. That in turn leaves enough space for the constant historical manipulation by politicians for their own agendas causing devastating consequences in the Macedonian society.

Nevertheless, we should consider the positive legacy of the historical avant-garde since the beginning of the 20th century with its historical achievements, especially after the movements in the 1960s when a significant number of relevant artists revealed a potential for eliminating the barriers between art and life. Holding a highly moral stance and demonstrating a readiness to sacrifice the painstakingly achieved autonomy of art throughout Modernity, they rejected elitist positions in the name of social equality. The artists working in and around *Kooperacija* admire these accomplishments and are somehow trying to revive their traditions by attempting to reinvigorate or reinvent them in the present context of the new challenges that stand before them.

There are those who see *Kooperacija* as a direct attack on the institutions and their official cultural program, which to some extent is true, but it is a simple fact that some projects organized by this initiative would be practically impossible to carry out within the conservative context of the state controlled institutions. It is unacceptable for many artists, especially ones highly aware of the socio-political context in which they produce, to allow themselves to be exploited by the institutions only so they could meet the required program targets in order to justify their existence as such. The absurd agenda based on the inherited inertia, without any effort for radical change according to contemporary needs, is a priority topic for critical re-examination. Therefore, it now becomes a responsibility for us in maintaining this practice as a relevant alternative in the hope that it will influence and inspire others to adopt its uniquely flexible platform and eventually create new ones.

What is your outlook for the future?

There is a reasonable doubt if there are currently any capacities or competent individuals who are able to create the necessary conditions for a democracy. Even the smallest signs of authoritarianism can be seen as leading to a non-political regime. Usually in such circumstances, the very concept of the public is put into question. Art relies on public presentation, so it finds itself at the very center of this problem. That's why the basic presumption is that Macedonia's future will be grim should all of us step aside and don't do anything about it. As far as the artists as public intellectuals are concerned, there is really no other alternative except action through the public sphere and accordingly, through art.

13.01.2014

Short bio:

Kooperacija is an art initiative founded in 2012 by Gjorgje Jovanovik, Filip Jovanovski, OPA (Obsessive Possessive

Aggression), Igor Toshevski and Nikola Uzunovski in Skopje, Macedonia. As a self-financed informal collective, **Kooperacija**'s main objective was to produce and promote critical art in an alternative way as a reaction to the complex political situation and the stifled state of the cultural institutions in Macedonia. Its strategy is exhibiting in privately-owned, temporarily available spaces such as apartments, offices and stores for rent. This nomadic approach proved to be a successful foundation for a new platform based on a critical approach not only in the domain of visual presentation, but through public debates, collaborative actions and artist presentations.

The exhibitions are based on topics which correspond to current socio-political issues of crucial importance regarding the community. The first show, "800 Revolutions per Minute" took place in a privately owned Laundromat in April, 2012. Since then, a number of other relevant artists have joined the activities taking place in various locations, covering different topics: "EPP (Economic Propaganda Messages)" dealt with Pop culture and Kitsch; "Personal Policies" addressed the stance towards aspects of collective trauma and political (ideological) manipulation; "Where is Everyone?" was staged literally in the dark (no lighting) as a parable of the devastating conditions regarding suppressed free speech and public media in the country, etc. The collective project "Kapital", produced for the anniversary of "Jadro (Association of the Independent Cultural Scene)", deliberately attacked the political parties' methods of bribing votes during local elections, but it also intended to expose the mechanisms of financing art.

Kooperacija's activities have now become established as social events attracting the interest of many young artists. Besides organizing their own exhibitions and debates, **Kooperacija** participates in seminars and presentations on a regional level. Worth mentioning is the production aspect of "Kooperacija": many of the works shown for the very first time in Kooperacija's exhibitions have already been highly awarded or taken part in other international shows, which only verifies Kooperacija's substantial role in the shaping of the cultural legacy in Macedonian contemporary art.



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