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# PROBLEMS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY AND SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT IN THE PRACTICE OF CONTEMPORARY ART IN THE BALKANS

Within a relatively short space of time three major exhibitions of contemporary art in the Balkan geographical area were organized in three cites in the two German speaking countries, Austria and Germany. Apart from bringing together examples of recent art, these events set out to portray Balkan culture as a whole, whether meant ironically or not. The titles of these representational framings provide a strong clue to the external perspective of the three best-known paternal figures of European curatorship: *In Search for Balkania* (Peter Weibel with the collaboration of Eda Cufer and Roger Conover in Graz), *Blood and Honey, Future's in the Balkans* (Harald Szeeman in Vienna) and *In the Gorges of the Balkans, a Report* (Rene Block in Kassel).

The trilogy was preceded by a series of extensive exhibitions covering art production in the geographical areas defined as Central Europe, East Europe and South East Europe[1] and can be seen as a further consequence of increasing Western interest in the cultural dynamics unleashed after the fall of state socialism and the EU eastward expansion. The peculiar coincidence in the timing of these events has raised suspicions about what the institutional and ideological motivations behind them might be.[2] The search for the latest hype in the art world already lingers over a series of geographies considered peripheral to the central nodes of Western art, as in, for example, Glasgow, Scandinavia, China and Latin America.

The basic argument waged by critics from the areas involved against these three art events is based on the argument that they do operate in accordance with the expansionist logic of the capital in retrieving new markets and labor force[3] and, further that they are a postcolonial continuation of cultural colonialism in which the cultural differences of 'exotic' regions is promoted.[4] The latter argument seems to tie in with the recent academic studies on 'Balkanism' which elaborate the legacy

of Edward Said's groundbreaking *Orientalism* within the specificity of the never properly defined geography of the Balkans.

A fair objection to the representational character of these large exhibitions is that they serve only to endorse a certain type of visual production – that of works that respond, directly or indirectly, to their local contexts and that can be read mainly with the attached knowledge in the specificity of these contexts. Artworks based merely on the epistemology of the new visual media or pure reflection on the institutional character of art have been excluded in favor of works that deal with social phenomena, traumas, political and cultural conflicts, asymmetries in power, urban problematics, and so on. In fact this sort of "ethnographic paradigm" has been the globally dominating tendency in the field of visual arts for some time.[5] However, though even inclined to work thematically within specified social contexts, many of the artists invited to these shows feel uncomfortable in being reduced to the status of context translator, the illustrator of cultural difference who reflects and reinterprets the paradigms and stereotypes of the cultural milieu he or she works in.

There also exists the suspicion that these sorts of exhibitions reflect "the displaced utopian and critical desires of the critics and curators in the centers they cannot find in their immediate surroundings, "the center's longing for some kind of political specificity in the art coming from 'out there'". Furthermore, this is not connected to the need of the social democratic or third-way governments of Europe to "deal with the local, multicultural politicization around immigrant communities"? (Kortun and Medina, 2003)

However, a shorthand equation between the historical construction of the Balkans from a Western European perspective and the scenarios and motivations of the aforementioned exhibitions falls short of explaining the whole setting and remains reductive. To a certain extent there is a danger here of reproducing the object of critique that is homogenizing a diverse set of cultural formations and construing a fetishized Occidental entity, which will merely adhere to the historic, binary antagonism devised between Europe and non-Europe, (or in the context of the Balkans, 'not-yet-Europe'). Besides, we should bear in mind that what differentiates the ideology of Balkanism from historical Orientalism is that it "also functions as a mechanism of domination within the Balkan countries themselves". (Močnik, 2002)

To go beyond the unproductive limits of constant complaining and self-victimization, there is a need to pursue the newly emerged energies

and modes of subjectivities that have arisen as a consequence of these recent geography-framing events. Retaining a critical distance to the representational character of these events we, as artists, curators and critics were not able to resist participating in them. On a basic level, they have provided the urge and material facilitation needed to produce works that are otherwise difficult to realize and exhibit at home. They have helped to build contacts in the art intelligentsia and art audience in central areas, and in the future this will hopefully lead to non-representational collaborations.

Of more serious benefit, however, is the transversal conversation that has been attained between neighboring art scenes in the region. Since the location of these gatherings is shifting slightly from the central institutions of Western Europe to the local art spaces of the East European/ Balkan region, a new potential for theoretical speculation is emerging that works on the convergences and divergences between the artist's productions and their contexts within a relational model of difference rather than binary structures of otherness.

The paralyzing lack of communication between the different art scenes of the Balkan region prior to the transition phase that followed 1989 was engendered as much by the isolationist consequences of century-long nationalism as by the complexities of Cold War politics. For this reason most encounters between the contexts lead to lengthy explanations of the selves that have been largely shaped and conditioned by national histories. In the geographically framed exhibitions, the artists and artworks are rarely exposed to national partitions; however, the catalog texts bring these pieces that are scattered in the exhibition space back into their national context.

This paper commences with a paralyzing paradox: it will pursue the conventional mode of categorization of national contexts, but at the same attempt to look at the strategies by which the notion of national identity has been challenged, interrupted or subverted by contemporary art practice in the Balkans. Use of the transversal links on the discursive grounds of the recently enhanced conversation between the scenes, the heterogeneities between the generations within the countries, and the differences between cities of the same country will be employed here strategically as a device to sidestep the reproduction of myths behind national organisms.

## (Counter-/Dis-/Non-/Over-) Identification

Two conventional methodologies of resistance to power and authority existed in the form of 'inversion' of the existing power relations in favor of the unprivileged segments of society (exemplified by the struggle to constitute a state based on proletarian interests) and 'subversion' of the whole power structure to overthrow the hierarchy altogether (defended by the anarchist theory in its classical phase). A Nieztschean critique of both of these radical strategies is based on the argument that "one cannot merely oppose authority by affirming its opposite: this is react to and, thus, affirm the domination one is supposedly resisting". (Newman, 2001)

The first half of the twentieth century witnessed a series of unorthodox reformisms within Marxism developed by young Lukács, Korsch, Benjamin, the Frankfurt school, and so on. One of the main figures of this group of thinkers was Henri Lefebvre. He attempted to introduce the Nietzschean critique of Hegelian dialectics into Marxist theory. He forged a 'thirding' element in the binary logic of dialectics, a strategic position from which to open it up to the expanding field of alterity. This 'trialectics' aimed to achieve a counterposed assemblage of multiple terms (starting symbolically with three), which would be mutually dependent and relativize each other.

After collaborating with Lefebvre for a while, the members of the Situationist International introduced the technique of *détournement*: the re-use of pre-existing artistic elements in new ensembles. For them, within the circulating plethora of signifiers in a world run by spectacle, there was no need for an absolute break and transgression to build up an 'outside' territory external to the system. A critical approach run by a subjective position could then appropriate the cultural products of the spectacle and modify them with subtle changes in meaning.

The structuralist objection to this subjective position ignited an extensive debate on the issue of self-formation, on the dilemma between agency and structure, between political engagement and anti-foundationalism, between metaphysics of an autonomous subject and dissolution of the subject into the language/discourse/inherited social codifications. After a long stalemate, Michel Foucault, one of the most prominent critics of the essential understandings of the self, human nature and anthropocentrism, attempted to sidestep the suffocating closure of the omnipotent discourse:

…We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. (Foucault, 1980)

The flexibility of moving within the discourse and playing with its inherent conflicts has been further elaborated by Judith Butler, the leading theoretician of performative theory. She proposed that "although the subject is a cultural construction, a product of a prior signifying process, it is capable of resignification, of rewriting the script" (Butler, 1995). Any identity has to be performed continuously through citation and repetition of its signifiers; however, each performance of identity opens a minute but crucial space of resignification of being disloyal to the signifier of that identity. This tiny element of divergence in the 'citational chain' creates the possibility of politicizing performance. The task remains of looking at what escapes…

Elaborating on Butler's investment in the notion of performance, Jose Esteban Muñoz develops the definition of the term 'disidentification'. For him, the strategy of the 'counteridentification', the conventional strategy of resisting the symbolic system of ideology, not only fails to overthrow the hegemony of the dominant discourses but also reifies the bifurcating dialectic it sought to undo through its appeal to a "controlled symmetry of counterdetermination." Disidentification, on the other hand, "works on and against dominant ideology" and "transform[s] a cultural logic within" (Muñoz, 1999). Against the frontal struggles of inverting or subverting the hierarchies dominating the social field, it approached the idea of 'conversing' the structure of these hierarchies as in the following:[6]

The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded massage's universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its working to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications. Thus, disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture. (Muñoz, 1999)

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Although clearly prioritized throughout the book, Muñoz concedes from the start that "disidentification is *not always* an adequate strategy of resistance or survival for all minority subjects; at times, resistance needs to be pronounced and direct." In the following pages of the book, he does not refer back to the moments in which disidentification remained a less effective and less preferable tool than its fellow strategy counteridentification, nor does he specify the nature of the occasions for 'direct' resistance. As moments of crisis, trauma and urgency, we must ask whether they allow much time for cultivation of a critical stance from the perpetual but slow attainments of the performative.

Muñoz's problematization of the notion of identification seems mainly to operate between the majoritarian hegemony of values and a pluralistic series of minoritarian resistance. However, there may be instances in which the process of identification between the individual and collective identity fails without referencing a minoritarian alterity – a displacement without the need for another space. How, for example, can someone experience a distantiation from his or her family or national identity – that is supposedly given by nature – if that person is not an apparent member of another national identity or of a minor ethnicity within the boundaries of that nation state? Should we call this a process of 'non-identification'?

This paper set out to speculate on the ways in which contemporary artists elaborate the notion of national identity in varying attitudes. Besides the two aforementioned strategies, I will also refer to the notions of 'non-identification' and 'over-identification'. The former strategy can operate either critically, as a strategic expulsion of the representational in art, or non-critically, as a disinterest in social engagement and loss of interest in anything political. Over-identification, on the other hand, works strategically by appropriating the properties of the criticized ideology and pushing them to the limits of the grotesque.[7]

## The Zone of Tension

The works of Sokol Beqiri, an artist based in Peja, convey a stark contrasts between some mundane elements appropriated from everyday life and the entertainment industry, and some shocking, tragic or violent records taken from 'real life'. The artist successfully combined luxuriously floating signifiers of the spectacle with disturbing scenes exemplifying

Sokol Beqiri, *The End of Expressionism*

the darker side of human kind. For example: excerpts from a Milka advertisement fused with images of successive butchery of several cows; scenes from an advertisement showing an animated chicken running in the streets of Broadway together with scenes of Lisa Minelli cheerfully singing "New York, New York" in the background contrasted by scenes in which Beqiri decapitates a number of chicken in his backyard using an axe, leaving them to flutter blindly to their death; or a Western children's TV program filled with happily hopping figures of some alien puppets interrupted by extracts from an interview made with the artist himself in which he emotionally collapses and cries while trying to explain what producing art meant in war-ridden Kosova. The latter interventions of Beqiri irritate the audience strategically and leave a sharp *Verfremdungseffekt* on the vanity of the former visual productions. This opposition also works metaphorically in that it underlines the asymmetry between Western lives in safety and non-Western lives in constant threat of danger.

The artist employs the same edgy comment in his project *End of Expressionism (Painted by a Madman)*. On the surface we may misjudge the two types of photographic images used in the composition as being purely aesthetic elaborations; on the one hand, some are semi-abstract

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figurations, while, on the other, there is the angelic look of a young boy lying contemplatively on a river's shallow ground, his hair floating lyrically in the stream. But there is a tragedy hidden in these pictures: the former photographs document totally burnt human bodies wrapped in red blankets and closer inspection of the picture of the boy in the water shows that his neck is broken and his body lifeless. The immediate aestheticism on the surface is undone by the bitter content; artistic conventions are dismounted by the sheer tragedy of the artist's social surrounding. Vaguely marked by a specified geography (i.e., Balkans), Beqiri nonetheless carefully avoids revealing the national or ethnic identity of the victims in the compositions.

The same generic quality is also present in his work entitled *When Angels Are Late* (2001). On a panel we see an average, traditional painting from Western art history with the religious theme of Abraham sacrificing his son interrupted by an angel descending from heaven. Moving closer to the panel we discover a peephole in the middle of the painting through which we see a very short, grainy and looped shoot of an unbearably shocking scene: a man lying on the ground, his head is pressed to the ground with a military boot and his throat being slit with a sword. Again the identity of the victim is mindfully avoided, the source of the documentary material not revealed. It is nonetheless possible to trace what the signification of the title (*When Angels Are Late*) was intended to be: aware of the fact that Beqiri and his whole family were deported during the recent  war, we can link the title to the NATO intervention during the conflict – although the analogy between the Western troops and the figure of angel remains ironic.

Another of Sokol Beqiri works depicts seven persons in a row, from the oldest to the youngest, each holding Albanian flags in both of their hands and performing navy flag signs in different positions. The people in the picture, who are in fact the members of the artist's family, seem to be in joyous mood and celebrating. The flag signs also hints at the arrival of military troops and through the use of the Albanian flag we are prompted to believe that the flag performance refers to the arrival of Western convoys in Kosova – and this is most probably in a welcoming manner, as we would expect of them. However, on realizing the meaning of the sentence produced by the people in the picture by their gestures, the audience experiences a displacement: it reads "FUCK YOU". Edi Muka (2001) reads this work as follows:

[C]aught in between nationalism on one side and international dullness regarding the status of his people on the other, the artist is addressing both sides with a coded alphabet and smiling faces. It's a call to everyone's consciousness, as to how difficult it can be to understand each other if the walls of hatred and the sets of preconditions are not erased from people's mind.

It is true that Beqiri bases his works on the vast platform between comfort and terror thus leaving the content open to interpretation, and it is also true that he for the most part succeeds in revealing his traumatic experience without falling into the traps of various essentialism. *Fuck You* (2001) nevertheless falls short in terms of displacing the appropriated image of the national icon and the related rhetoric shadow of nationalism. I am not certain whether the discrepancy between the smiling faces in the picture and the provocative sentence they construct do in fact play against each other.

In most of his earlier works characterized by their instinctively anthropologist approach, the artist Erzen Shkololli, also from Peja, grappled with the tension between traditional rituals, ceremonies and objects of his culture and the contemporary symbolic values imposed on them (Muka, 2001). The barely readable political subtext to these works became the constitutive trait of Shkololli's later production in which he foregrounded the issue of identity in contemporary Kosova. In the *Transition* triptych (2001), a fragmented subjectivity between different sorts of identities is exemplified by three different, juxtaposed real life portraits of the artist himself: a picture taken during his circumcision ceremony, a studio photograph depicting him as a young pioneer, and a recent passport photograph with the twelve stars of the EU in the background. Clad with adequate formal codifications, Shkololli's body becomes the shifting surface on which the Muslim faith, communist ideology and the construction of a new European identity try to gain purchase.

The issue of national identity is elaborated by the artist in two different works. In *Hey You* (2002) we see Skurte Fejza, a well-known Albanian folk singer, performing a song in her traditional costume. The lyrics start with an interpellation directed towards Europe:

Hey Europe / Hey Europe I'm addressing you a letter / As Albanian of Old Albania / How are my sons / You know well that they're in emigration / Hey You gray-haired Europe / Do You remember my territories? / Do You

remember Albanians in one homeland? / Why didn't You consult the papers that You've in London? / How did you cut off our borders! / My brothers and sisters were left outside / My nephews and nieces they're left behind / You have divided the Eagle's sons in two parts / … / I'm pledging You for God's sake / Make them united, the George Castriota's sons / That you've divided them long ago / We've never stopped crying / At the end of this letter I'm writing / Don't play with the Albanians / If they break Eagle's wing / Oh the whole Balkan will burn.

In the 1980s Fejza was persecuted by the official authorities for the intensive nationalist agenda of her lyrics. The song she performs in Shkololli's piece has again a contemporary political agenda in reproaching Europe for preventing the unity of a Greater Albania and causing suffering and further risks in the Balkans. The striking convergence of the traditional values and actual politics is the leading dynamic in this piece, as it was in the artist's earlier works of Shkololli. But, what of the



Erzen Shkololli, *Albanian Flag on the Moon*

lyrics? Should the artist not have distantiated himself from the immediate discourse inherent in the song, through an estrangement effect, an irony or whatever? Does the shining background on which Fejza is placed really mark her isolation, her inability to make her voice heard, as Shkololli argues? Or does it in fact accentuate the contours of a national identity that is already fully present in her traditional outfit?

It is clear that Shkololli does not subscribe to essentialist politics. His other piece on the same subject, *Albanian Flag on the Moon*, pursues the explicit strategy of approaching ironically the representational character of national tropes: the image of a cosmonaut thrusting an Albanian flag into the soil of the moon is strategically grotesque. But has not the content in *Hey You* been left without trace of distance or irony which could short-circuit the process of identification? Can a radical propound function without a visible mark of criticality?[8] Does my argument here impose a standardized principle of political correctness on the singularities of different geographies?[9] Can the national identity of a country that is heavily under construction afford a certain sense of patriotism and identification with a representational 'We'? Does the evaluation of national identity differ between the oppressor and the oppressed, cultures in safety and cultures in agony? Does criticism waged against Europe (which is paradoxically able to tolerate this reproach with masochistic ease) or the West in general create a space for national identification in a new anti-imperialist gesture? Would we again run the risk of occidentalizing Europe?[10]

In 2003 the project *Balkan Konsulat* organized by the >rotor< gallery in Graz hosted a series of exhibitions based on the cities of Southeast Europe. Apart from the main events, the guest curators were asked to choose two artworks to be exhibited on one of the billboards placed in the city and then later published in the Austrian daily newspaper *der Standard* and travel to other contributing cities. Stevan Vuković, the curator of the Belgrade exhibition proposed Dejan Grba and his work *The Deceased – Archive.*

This archival image was in fact preceded by a series of works entitled *The Deceased.* These were made up of photographs, which, in the artist's description, were "of (mostly younger) people who perform a scene of their own imagined death as if it would have happened in this period of their life." Referring to Roland Barthes' use of a photograph of a young man sentenced to death and awaiting execution, and to the general human tragedy of facing death, the images in the series still bore the traces of a

situated, locally specific fear of death in the young imaginations that had suffered severely from an irrationally bloody decade which saw the collapse of Yugoslavia. More than being just about death, these performative enactments of one's own death (or rather murder), at a relatively younger age, were intended to promote an intimate understanding of the daily politics of being alive.

*The Deceased – Archive*, being designed to complement the previous series, actually operated with a methodology opposed to that of the previous photographs. This time the scene of death was based on archival material that unavoidably called back the notion of truth. The historical photographs employed originated from World War II. The image depicted shows the corpse of a young boy lying on a table with his severed head placed besides his innocent body. Basic digital intervention by Grba transferred the severed head back onto the torso, reconstituting the wholeness of the body, bringing it back to life, but retaining the severed head, the visual effect was kept, i.e., the trauma, the horror.  In his concept description Grba makes it clear that he is aware of the "potentially disturbing nature" of the work, and he invites the viewer to go beyond contextualizing the image and to "overcome the possible (and quite probable) unease" through an appeal to "self-introspection". However,



Dejan Grba, *The Deceased – Archive*

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some nonetheless found the image disturbing and preferred not to dis-contextualize it. *Der Standard* stated they would not publish the image in their papers and the exhibition partner in Sarajevo said that they would not have it displayed on a billboard in their city.

The objection by *der Standard* was probably related to their disinclination to bring haunting images of a horror experienced somewhere close by to the well-protected, family-based, social democrat households of their readers. However, the discomfort of the associates in Sarajevo was undoubtedly related to the direct, specific and deeply traumatic experience of the siege and terror inflicted on their city, rather than to a generic visual disturbance caused by the displaying of human agony, disintegrated human bodies, and so on. It was a statement about Sarajevo's unpreparedness for being treated by a process of abreaction. The correct time to deal with that trauma will be decided by the city itself, they implied – and perhaps the unspoken sentiment was also whispered: 'not by an artist from Serbia'.

Was Grba's plea to the audience inhabiting the public space not to over-contextualize his piece bound to fail from the start (i.e., not to contextualize it through the overwhelming signifier of the country he originates from)? Should he have been more attentive to the extreme fragilities of the region by pursuing a politically correct reservedness? Was there not a danger of echoing the ideological rhetoric of the Milosević regime that had consistently construed Serbians as the initial victims of the disintegration process of Yugoslavia and the following wave of ethnic cleansing and massacres? Should Grba instead have remained within the restrained, speechless posture of 'shame', being something completely different than the sense of 'guilt'?[11] And what of the trauma of the masses that are reductively clustered under the name of the oppressing state apparatus, the trauma of the victims of the Milosević regime within Serbia, of a generation that had to witness the demise of its own youth? Given these circumstances, can we afford to ask for a "pre-conscious self-censorship, a way of obscuring a world that could no longer be presented in comprehensible terms?"[12]

How far can we identify the content of an artwork with the burden of its historical references, and the artist with his or her national identity? To what extent can an artist distantiate or divorce him or herself from his or her national identity, and by means of which strategies? These are complex issues relating to the question as to how to develop a creative strategy that interacts with a new paradigm; and behind this lies another

set of questions concerned with how to remain operating in the social context of a particular region without being trapped by the centripetal force of national identity. Do these lines belong merely to a conspiring 'Turkish' guy with the uncannily flag-like surname 'Kosova'?

## Engagement in Belgrade

> The reason that somebody feels the need to engage in political art after all is then not so much a matter of art's ability to change the world, but its ability to change itself in relation to the world, in its inability to exclude itself from the surrounding world, and, finally, in its desire to subvert and provoke the ideological mechanisms which threaten it. (Dimitrijević and Anđelković, 1997)

Up until this point I have tried to look at problematic social contexts in which even a contingent proximity to the representational scheme of national identity, intended or not, endangers the viability of a critical position. Within this framework, the process of identification is contrasted with its 'outside', a space for non-identification in regard to the idea of nation as the producer of belongingness. However, in some instances this process of non-identification is extended to the larger field of social engagement, so that any interest in social or political phenomena is ruled out from the start. But what would then be the object of criticality in that 'interest-less' space?

Art's ideological release from the doctrine of socialist realism was accomplished in Yugoslavia at a relatively early stage. From the 1950s onwards, this newly appropriated space of freedom from the ideologically imposed responsibility for social engagement was filled with terms such as 'modernism', 'modernity' and 'modern' that would promote the notions of "progress, internationalism, cosmopolitanism and belief in the positive flow of history". The escape from the local, national and traditional would paradoxically "fit in perfectly with the new imagery of the party bureaucracy [of the self-management socialism of Yugoslavia], which represented itself as the bearer of the new ideology of emancipation or modernity and progress". (Blažević, 1999)

Against this moderate and 'neutral' 'socialist aestheticism', which "satisfied the new middle class taste" and kept the regime safe from
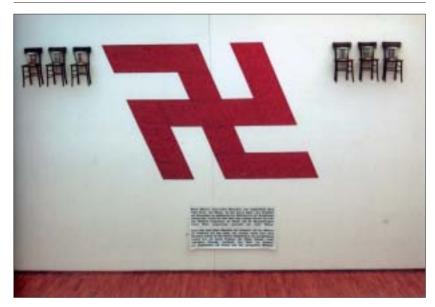
social criticism, a new artistic ground emerged in the aftermath of the global spirit of uprisings of 1968. In line with the neo-avant-garde movement that was changing artistic paradigms in the West, this 'radical modernism' in Yugoslavia based itself on "a counter-culture that would integrate the utopian dimension of history/society with the artistic sphere" (Blažević, 1999), that would question the meaning and context of art along side a general critique of the ruling system.

Still, the escalation of tension in the country, which was to lead to its final collapse, and the following traumas and civil wars found no expression in the artistic field. A decade of horror was received either by an 'active escapism' of the progressive elements of the scene (Vuković, 2001), a refashioning of the "politics of non-political art" through the terms of 'Second Modernism' or 'Modernism after Postmodernism' (Pejić, 1999a) within the mainstream, or by the conservative and official promotion of a Neo-Orthodoxist art based on anti-Western sentiments and essentialist politics of nationalism and religious identity.

> Unions of artists, critics, curators and theoreticians abandoned the institutional territories and moved out into their parallel worlds, remaining, through a greater part of the last decade of the twentieth century, in a state of permanent internal exile, in a unique triple hoop of the lack of communicability, caused by their own refusal to participate in the reality that was forced upon them, then of the institutional blockade of art courses that were considered to be inadequate for the paradigm of the new establishment's representation, as well as the blockade of state borders that referred to all forms of international cooperation … (Vuković, 2001)

> What the thin layer of the bourgeoisie, the champions of the great game of psychological repression, especially identified with the never-lived 'belle époque' was the concept of culture, of *Culture* which in these 'murky times' was the only thing to remain depoliticized, non-partisan and above party politics, beautiful and autonomous, elevated and consoling. (Dimitrijević and Anđelković, 1997)

The edgy character of the radical modernism of the seventies was kept active only by the figure of Raša Todosijević through his "cynical comments on the identification processes used to establish the national ideology as well as on the slang of authenticity in local art" (Vuković, 2001) throughout the 1990s. His lengthy series of installations entitled *Gott liebt die Serben*, initiated in 1989, represented a persistent criticism

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Raša Todosijević, *Gott Liebt die Serben*

of the collective myths prompted by the rising nationalist ideology in Yugoslavia's disintegration. He followed "a strategy of action through ambiguous slippage of meanings and ideological positions" (Dimitrijević and Anđelković, 1997) by combining strong symbols (a swastika, Yugoslavian flag, menorah) with everyday objects of politically suggestive quality (suitcases, office furniture, traditional Serbian food, chairs); however, beneath this ambiguity, he established a consistent and bitter ridiculization of the totalitarian, racist and essentialist mind. The irony in the coupling of religious and nationalist rhetoric within the short title is enhanced by its Germanization.[13] The *Gott liebt die Serben* series remained for a while one of the rare artistic expressions opening up the possibility of a re-politicization, of an absolute rejection of identification, and a brave counter-stance to the various nationalisms that dominated Serbia for a decade.

In parallel to the rising anger against the Milosević regime that culminated in the 88 day long demonstrations in 1996/97, the shells of inner exile of the art scene in Belgrade started to crack. As Stefan Vuković put it, "the idea of a new reality that would not just stand parallel with the imposed one, but one that would openly compete with it, became

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paradigmatic only in the mid 90s" (2001). One of the figures, who could combine this shift towards social engagement with an experimental formal approach was Milica Tomić. Her video installation *XY Ungelöst* (1997) takes its name from a German TV program in the 1970s in which selected crimes that had remained unsolved were briefly reconstructed and viewers were invited to reflect on possible perpetrators. At the beginning of Tomić's project the content was geo-culturally situated in a double bind. The date that appears both at the beginning and the end, 28 March 1989, refers both to the declaration of statehood of the Republic of Serbia through a new constitution and to the political murder of 33 people of Albanian origin that happened on the very same day. On the two screens of the project the audience can see 33 extras (figures from the Belgrade art scene) acting as the people killed in the aforementioned and unresolved incident, as figures falling and leaving traces on snow covered ground, and the single figure of a women (the artist herself) seemingly in a moment of emotional and physical tension. As the title of the work implies Tomić's objective here is to introduce a fictive platform on which to exhibit the willingness and the intention to investigate crimes that have remained unaccounted for until now – though perhaps having no effect on the incidents of the past, it would have potential in the future in terms of supporting public opinion against the state-perpetrated violence which had become a self-assured practice in the Milosević era. Moreover, the motivation of the artist here "is not to make this crime a 'universal' one (or to abstract it all the way to the level of an irresponsible generalization), but to make it a specific one, and identify it as a real but typical case, that turns out to be a general rule". (Dimitrijević and Anđelković, 1997)

Todosijević's series of *Gott liebt die Serben* proposes a strategy of avoidance of a homogenizing and essentializing construction of a national identity by pushing its mythological rhetoric to the extreme until it becomes dysfunctional. The counter-identification process in *Gott liebt die Serben* remains critically and subversively in the field of national identity. It performs a deconstruction of the process of identification with an essentialized and fixed 'we'. In *XY Ungelöst* Tomić devises the process of identification; however, not with the 'we' that the family or the collective identity we live in asks us to identify with, the 'we' that we supposedly share similar traits with, but, in a symbolic gesture, with the 'we' that we are supposed to counter-identify with, with the 'others', through which the difference of our supposed collectivity is defined. *XY Ungelöst* steps affirmatively out of the fixed borders of the national identity

in order to display the similarity we share with those positioned as the other. Additionally, the use of extras from the Belgrade art scene, different sorts of collectivity models short-circuiting the national identity are proposed, such as the art community, the city of Belgrade itself, and the urban with its cosmopolitan nature.

Another work by the same artist, *I am Milica Tomić* (1998-99), carries this 'stepping out' gesture further. In the video we see the rotating figure of the artist, who first utters "I am Milica Tomić – I am a Serbian". However, afterwards this equation between her subjectivity and her attached national identity is disassembled by the following utterances: "I am Milica Tomić – I am a Korean", "I am Milica Tomić – I am a Norwegian" and so on. The repetition of the expression in various languages relativizes and denaturalizes the initial equation and underlines the arbitrary character of the process of national identification. Another project, *Milica Tomić and Róza El-Hassan Driving in the Porsche and Thinking about the Overpopulation* (2000), sees the two artists, El-Hassan and Milica Tomić wearing her partisan uniform, hint at other levels of identification that cut across the national level. The problematic implied in the title (the so-called overpopulation of Europe with non-Europeans) is linked through the figure of Jörg Haider, the ultra-nationalist Austrian politician with a heavy anti-immigrationist agenda, at the steering wheel of the sports car to the economic power asymmetries of the globe with cultural consequences.

The pluralistic dispersion of singular subjectivities into different forms of identifications, which, from the start, circumvent the fixation of individuals to essentialist monolithic identities, is also the determinant motif in Uroš Djurić's *Populist Project*. The concept of 'populism' has been appropriated by the artist in an affirmative twist in order to emphasize the impossibility of a full-scale assimilation of the dynamic and amorphous organism called 'the people' by a political program (Vuković, 2003). As in Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht's approach to the positive use of mass media in their early, anarchistically optimist phases, Djurić re-evaluates the emancipatory potential residing in mass culture and phantasmatic mobility between popular representations. Football arenas, for instance, are considered one of the most prominent social spaces shaping nationalistic expression mingled with misogyny and homophobia. Nonetheless, they are at the same time the space of unbound fantasy, in which people desire to see spectacular, world-famous football players from foreign countries in the clubs they support; or similarly, young

footballers dream of playing in the foreign leagues that are better than their local ones.

*God Loves the Dreams of Serbian Artists*, a series photographs with the frame of the Populist Project, exemplifies the personal fantasy exceeding the borders of the nation-state. In an ironic twist, the title of the series fractures the aggressively exclusionary and xenophobic rhetoric of nationalism that is referred to. If Todosijević's strategic use of the slogan intended to ridicule the closure advocated by this sort of thinking, Djurić's appropriation exploits its inner conflicts and marks the openings and potential circulations within the tainted field of football. In the pictures, we see Djurić posing on the pitch alongside the eleven players from some West European football teams and wearing the same complete kit as they do. In other photographs, he stands with a number of famous footballers in the corridors of hotels or stadiums and takes a quick snap shot with them just as a proper football fan would do. Another series of the project called *Celebrities* follows the same idea, in which the artist himself is pictured alongside prominent artists,[14] famous movie stars, politicians and so on.

The third part of the Populist Project, as series of cover designs of a fictional publication called *Hometown Boys* and promoted as "The First Serbian Porn, Art & Society magazine", brings together various visual items taken from hardcore pornography, radical politics, football matches, street clashes, techno parties, rock concerts and current political events. Stevan Vuković (2003) rightly sees in Djurić's project a free space for individuation, deliberation and interpretation of representations in the popular field; however, Djurić's work also runs through the collective nature of the urban; habits, myths and symbolic consumptions (vinyl records, local rock concerts, porn circulation, trips to other geographies and the bringing back of goods from those places, etc.), which made Belgrade the locus of resistance to the Milosević regime, still keeps it unique and at the same time cosmopolitan and connected to other urban textures in the rest of the world.[15]

Branko Dimitrejić (2002) is quite critical of this "invention" of the urban culture of Belgrade which is portrayed "as something that is 'good' in itself … by the admirers of Serbian opposition movements, of the activities of Radio B92 and by all those who believed that there is such a thing as 'the other Serbia' visually manifest in rock 'n' roll bands playing

in smoky garages or 'western-looking' kids in gritty urban landscapes". Dimitrejić's objection to the 'false' dichotomy between the First Serbia, i.e., that of Milosević, and the Second/Other Serbia that resisted it, seems to be based on the questionable political motivations of the latter, which pursued a covert mode of conservatism, inheriting elements from the anti-Titoist past, and which proved incapable of divorcing itself from the 'alternative' nationalisms opposing the one in the government. In a parallel analysis, he also underlines the elitism, xenophobia and cultural racism surfacing occasionally among bourgeois segments of the urban. However, I still stick with my investment in the concept of the urban, or at least in the progressive qualities of it as exemplified in the work of Uroš Djurić. Belongingness to the ideas that are less than a nation, such as a city, a neighborhood, a football team, may accelerate the fragmentation of the contents of identification that is proffered or forced upon the subject and decentralize the political power invested in them. Living in the *bourg* exceeds the values of the *bourgeoisie*.

Dimitrejić expresses his contention of the binary relationship between the First and Second Serbias in the context of *Young Serbs* (2001), the photographic series by the artist Phil Collins, which portrayed young people from Belgrade. His review of the works detected a certain sense of narcissism in the close-up shots of the faces of the portrayed figures, which he explained in an analysis based on the idea of a post-traumatic generation. This analysis triggered a succession of responses by the portrayed themselves. One of the crucial contentions posed in these texts concerned Dimitrejić's phrase of 'suspended adulthood' which implied a distantiation of the young people in their twenties from the excessively laden political context of Serbia. As a 'thirding' element employed in bypassing the aforementioned dichotomy, it is not clear whether Dimitrejić discerns an emancipatory opening in it or a danger of apolitization. Dušan Grlja, one of the contributors rightly observes that Dimitrejić's appeal to the notion of 'suspended adolescence' aims to define a phenomenon specific to a geography and culture but ends up in portraying a global situation. So in the end, 'the other Serbia' becomes "a representation of the 'globalized' Serbia that takes part in 'civilisational trends'" (Grlja, 2002). The contributors to this amazing discussion question the viability of an analysis based on the notion of generation, the (im)possibility of the construction of a 'we' and the need for a switch from the dysfunctional and in some cases apolitical mode of 'protest' (embodied as the Second Serbia) to a mode of engaged 'criticism'.

## România versus Non-Identitaire ?

In the second half of the 1960s and the early years of the 1970s the restrictive grip of the state apparatus on artistic production entered a relatively relaxed atmosphere in comparison with the proceeding two decades, and this allowed for a certain amount of re-'synchronization' between art production in Romania and the Western world. New art practices of a neo-avant-garde nature emerged in various central cities of the country, but due to economic difficulties and a lack of access to new visual technology this new experimentality remained pretty much within the frame of practices of happenings, performances and land-art. However, as a consequence of the ideological hardening that occurred in the course of the 1970s, these practices could only be realized in private spaces or on unpopulated sites, thus stripping them of their constitutive part: the public. In order to distinguish these practices from the notions of happening and performance, Ileana Pintile (2002) names them as practices of 'actionism'. The concept does signify the absence of communicability of these practices, rather it confers them a political tone. However, politicality, the twin dynamic of conceptualization in the recent art practice, was not expressed in a manifest manner – it couldn't be. As Bojana Pejić (1999b) puts it, "in a fully politicized socialist society ruled by a Communist Party, all political art was seen as an 'anti-Communist' act". References to social life were formulated either through universalized terms of humanism or spiritual terms of semi-religious sources. The topics were generally chosen from generic notions such as birth, death, fertilization, suffering and violence; the works were spatially situated mostly in open sites, and remained unspecified through social contexts; the signifiers of protestation were carried through carefully encoded symbolical acts, such as strategic passivity, destruction of the artwork, fire and, to a certain extent, self-destructive gestures. "Any creation which [was] non-conformist charge[d] itself with political meaning, implicit or declared", says Alexandra Titu (1997). However, as the Ceaușescu regime drifted towards an increasingly irrational regime of paranoia and control, 'declared' references to political life, iconography and representations thereof, such as the cult figure of the leader or the flags of the nation or the party, remained scarce – of course, there were some exceptions, as in some of the works of Ion Grigorescu, Paul Neagu and Teodor Graur, albeit "in a rather veiled and allusive form". (Pintilie, 2002)

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The 1989 revolution caused an immense opening in all senses; it also brought the "discovery of the social as a source for commentary" (Titu, 1997). It would be a difficult task to map out all the artists and works related to social and political thematization and to place them in their specific contexts. The scenario I offer in the following is merely a partial, personal, and to a certain extent, biased reading.

From 1991 Dan Perjovschi set out to produce drawings with political comments in alternative, oppositional publications such as *Contrapunct* and *22*. The manifestly public character of his profession in these magazines slowly began to affect his performances in field of contemporary art. In 1992, in a performance entitled *The Appropriation (of Land) Committee,* Perjovschi sold fifty pieces of 6 x 8 cm portions of soil, symbolizing the land of Romania. This act indicated his willingness to contribute to the transition phase from the remnants of the Ceaușescu regime to a democratic society. The fever for intensifying this process was illustrated by the symbolical re-privatization of the land that had been collectivized under the previous regime with terrible social and agricultural consequences. The performance did not suggest a wholesale privatization towards the monopolist capitalism of an ethical property speculation, rather it suggested a symbolically homogenized, humble re-distribution of possession and dignity. On the other hand, it also responded to its political context in which the newly defined nationalist paranoia conceived the process of land privatization as a danger of intrusion by foreign elements (including the minorities within the country) and a threat to national integrity. The 'sell-out' in Perjovschi's performance worked symbolically in favor of 'the people' but against the interests of 'the nation'.

One year later, in a performance that formed part of the festival *Europe Zone East*, Perjovschi had the word 'România' tattooed on his arm. Tattoos have been used as a tool of identification with certain cultural values. Inscribed skin becomes the site of inclusion and exclusion, a border between the social and the individual or the community the individual belongs to. It is widely used to signify identifications within minoritarian groups since the dominant majority does not need any additional marking to be exhibited in the social space. Minoritarian identities and subcultures use tattoos as an instrument of differentiation between the homogenous bulk of the masses and in order to facilitate the recognition among the members of these differentiated and marked communities. Perjovschi's tattoo, on the other hand, rested on a tension. In order to irritate and displace the sterile and conformist quality of the contemporary art scene

Dan Perjovchi, *Tattoo Performance*

of that time aesthetically and culturally (tattoos were not then very popular in Romania), Perjovschi applied this technique of differentiation normally practiced by prisoners, gypsies or marine soldiers. However, the word inscribed on his arm was the signifier of the majoritorian belonging to a national identity. Can such a mode of identification be re-formulated as a minoritarian position? And if so, against which higher identity? Here we face the second step of Perjovschi's critique.

In contrast to the canons of happenings and performances that have reinstated "the traditional male role of the active subject" (Piotrowski, 2002), Perjovschi in this performance was exposed to an external act. He sat on a chair and extended his left arm while someone else inscribed pigment into his skin; the word 'România' and the consequent representational branding are imposed onto an individual body by someone else. Is it the 'master symbol' of national identity imposed on him by the nationalist discourse of the Ceaușescu era? Or more accurately, by the more recent, re-invented "national history which [was] now being re-told without censorship" (Pejić, 1999b)? The 'someone else' referred to here in this performance could perhaps be Europe. In the political context of that time, Perjovschi allowed himself to be "stamped as a cow" to indicate

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the objectivization of any person living in Romania. This ironic passivity targets the power asymmetry between the West and the organic complexity, which it reduced into the single word of 'România'. Still, there is a circumflex on the first 'a', a sign of indigenousness. In this context, could this not also be non-ironical identification with the name of the country – at least in front of the new Big Brother that was Europe? What would we think of an artist from Belgrade, for example, who had the word 'Serbia' tattooed on his body in the 1990s, whether meant ironically or not?

Two years later, Perjovschi produced four montaged photographs. He can be seen posing with his tattoo clearly visible in front of various urban settings in Bucharest. The composition with a shabby hut used as a toilette in the open field was entitled *The Most Beautiful Country in the World*. Another showing a church squeezed between two high buildings was called *Always Between Two Empires*. The one depicting the infamous People's House had the title *A Tiny People with Such A Big House*. While the fourth composition depicted an old drunk sleeping in a public space and carried the title *Freedom Thirsty*. These show a bitter irony that displaces the boastful terminology of nationalism, but at the same time retains an empathic link to and embeddedness in the geo-culture that is Romania.

The irony was more intensive in the projects of the art project SubREAL of the early 1990s. The group combined various stereotypes about being Romanian in utterly subversive sarcasm or, as in their words, in a "cynicism [operating as] an international trend in a nationalistic context". They had two targets to displace: the rising nationalism and the negative exoticism of the European gaze in respect of Romania. *Draculaland*, for example, superimposes two historical images in a single, funny composition. In this image we basically see the reproduction of Leonardo's Mona Lisa; however, the face of the figure is replaced by the hideous head of Vlad the Impaler. The displacing effect of looking at something (or rather two things) that are familiar but in a completely uncanny fusion leads to mockery of what both images represent. A historical figure recently re-honored by the official authorities as one of the forerunners of national independence was shown in a drag costume. On the other hand, one of the icons of aesthetic excellence of Western civilization was transformed into a nightmarish appearance of Prince Dracula. The Western imagination that locates its fantasized monsters in other (neighboring) geographies, in this case that of Bram Stroker's novel, is sabotaged by the re-installing

of the nightmare in the parts of that imagination that were considered to remain forever in harmony, beauty and order.

Another work by SubREAL, *The Castle*, is rich in its interconnected layers. The group was invited to an exhibition to be held at Ujazdowski Castle in Poland. For this show the group decided to refer to the Jules Verne's novel *Le Château des Carpathes*, which told the story of a noble living alone in his castle up on a hill and spying, through a complex set of strange auditory and optical devices, upon his subjects living down the hill. By constructing a miniature version of the People's House, SubREAL made use of the connotation inherent in Verne's novel that is easily extendable to 'the Genius of the Carpathians' who built a similarly paranoiac system of "Securitate". A chair having long stakes instead of legs (another reference to Vlad the Impaler) dangled from the miniature castle. However, more interestingly, they used packets of *Carpaţi*, the Romanian cigarettes widely popular on the black market in Poland in the 1980s, as building material for the replica. Nationalist myths, myths about Romania fabricated by the colonialist conventions of European literature, basic goods, versatile relations between the ex-socialist countries and illegal commerce came together in a single rhizomatic composition.

The features employed in the SubREAL projects are mostly of representational character and the humorous settings offered by the group between these elements points to the impossibility of going beyond this representational level. There is no truth in terms of there being a Romanian essence to discover. And there is no way to see the personal affiliations of the members of the group to the idea of Romania – except in their personal pursuits of art. Both of the members of the project, Călin Dan and Josif Kiraly have more recently concentrated on the contemporary urban texture of Bucharest. Their photography-based investigations of the city reveal a willingness and an empathic attachment to record the current transitions in architecture, problems in urban planning, sociological dimensions of housing, etc. Josif Kiraly's photographic series *Re-constructions*, comprising compositions of multiple pictures shot at different times and from slightly varying perspectives allude also to the quest for an integral meaning from the dizzying, fragmented experiences of the phase called 'transition'.

It was impossible not to respond to the events of 1989. But what happened later? Did art continue to be produced during the process of

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normalization? In an exhibition they curated in France, Laurence Bosse and Hans Ulrich Obrist defined what they saw in Romania as "une scene postnationale et heterogene, emergente et nonidentitaire".[16] Post-national… "The shift from the local obsessions regarding national salvation to a desire for the fastest and most encompassing connection possible" (Balaci, 2003). It is perfectly understandable; but should the annexation to the global mean also a shift towards the post-political -*deconnexion* from the social?

My generation, namely those born in the first half of the 1970s and who were in their twenties by the 1990s in a normalizing Romania, seems to have retreated from any interest in the social, if not from any critical art practice. Should we read it as a positive sign of being normalized, or more than that, of living in an attained normalcy? Is it a matter of the gains of the previous generation that struggled to formulate the transition phase in a proper analysis? Is it a matter of an optimistic view of contemporary Romania that claims to have already connected to the hyper-speed of global circulation of signifiers: cable television, MTV, internet, chic and sexy magazines from England? A 'suspended adolescence'? Or the illusive cushion effect that was once produced by Soros foundation, a sense of safety and hope? and is EU accession on its way? Or is it the opposite – pessimism about the future of the country, tiredness in waiting for the never arriving normalcy in economic terms? Is it a question of whether to divert to other geographies or of already having left the country, starting a business or giving up art production in the face of seducing offers from the advertising industry, broadcast companies and (graphic) design studios? Leaving the pitch empty?

Cosmin Gradinaru is an interesting name among those seeking to understand this generation in transition. In a series of photographs he visualized a traumatic event he experienced in his past. When only ten, he came across an aborted fetus discarded in the woods. More than just facing a human being that been robbed of life and falling into the midst of existential questions of life and death at an early age, Gradinaru was traumatized by the reaction of his mother who chastised him for reporting the fetus to the local police. She knew that the authorities would trace the mother of the baby in order to persecute her bitterly. The enforcement of ideological demographic targets produced an unspoken but daily terror among the people. Gradinaru was perplexed by the discrepancy between what he was taught in terms of being a proper citizen and the teachings of his own mother. Thirteen years later when he came across yet another

disposed fetus he could not resist taking pictures of it. The haunting image of the first fetus, a death inflicted by a so-called communism, re-surfaced – but this time in the context of another different ideological regime. Normalization accomplished, but not the normalcy.

In the description of another series of photographs depicting gypsies recycling steel, Gradinaru wrote: "First of all this series of photos is not about an exotic and backward Romania, it is about a nomadic community that has kept its tradition alive over the years, despite all the social and political pressures during the communist period."[17] His resistance to a reception of his work that would reduce it into a national allegory is quite telling. Clearly, it is primarily a shield used against the exotizing gaze of the European, but it also illustrates the ways in which one can deal with the social without falling into the traps of thinking in the terms of the nation. The content of Gradinaru's works is very atypical of his generation, but his ongoing distantiation from art production in favor of an entrepreneurship of subcultural fashion design seems to be symptomatic.

Young people in their early twenties are about to take to the stage. They have already inherited the thematics of the previous generation: psychologism, the use of everyday life occurrences, depiction of the 'misery of student life', quotidian objects, subcultural iconography (hip-hop, graffiti, stencils, etc.). Yet there is a recent vague but perceivable twist to approaches to local or political issues that conceive of Romania as a whole and define a common enunciative field, perhaps as a generation – the last that will have the Ceaușescu disaster in its memory.[18]

In a recent exhibition held in his private apartment, Vlad Nanca brought together works that relate to the figures or figurations representative of Romanian national life, such as the national car, the Dacia, the national poet, Eminescu, the national artist, Brancuși, and so on. The title of the exhibition is itself a clear declaration of situatedness: *Vlad Nanca, Lives and Works in Bucharest* (2003). On the humorous flier for the exhibition we see a man on the ground trying to repair a broken Dacia. One of works in the exhibition, *Original Adidas*, deals with the daily suffering of the 1980s in which finding and buying meat was difficult and the complementary parts of animals that were bought instead were named ironically by the general population after luxurious goods that could be found in the West. Thus, the flimsy claws of chicken were called 'cutlery', pigs head 'computer', and the meatless feet of the pig

Vlad Nanca, *Original Adidas*

'addidas'. The latter anonymous metaphor is literalized here by Nanca through the three stripes of the famous brand placed onto pig's feet.

Another work of the exhibition illustrates the confusion between the continuities and ruptures in the Romanian near past and future. The dizzying shift between the two, once warring ideological continents – the state communism of Eastern Europe and the liberal social democracy of Western Europe – is represented by two flags. One of the flags bares the hammer and sickle of the USSR, while the shows bares the circular twelve stars of the EU. Will the latter truly replace the former? Is the EU really the only viable alternative for a Romania still trying to heal the traumas of its nightmarish past? Nanca's sardonic swapping of the colors of the two flags (a blue & yellow USSR flag and red & yellow EU flag) points to the confusion among Romanian minds - the split of the national tricolor into two trans-national entities.

The national tricolor of the Romanian flag has another signification in the city of Cluj. Its fetishization by the city's ultra-nationalist mayor in his furnishing of the whole city center with small flags, spreading it to every kind of urban furniture (litter bins, benches, street posts, electricity

posts, flowers in the parks) creates a grotesque festivity of color but also a frightening paranoiac space defined in opposition to the Hungarian population of the city and in Transylvania in general. Mircea Cantor and Ciprian Mureșan' series of photographs entitled *New Species* is a deconstructive mockery of this weird situation. In them we see both artists watering meticulously the colored street posts. It is on the one hand a parodying gesture of the doubling of the absurdity of the cityscape, while on the other hand it ridicules the nationalist attribution of 'organic' quality to inanimate things and representations.

The recent emergence of direct interest in the issues surrounding social, national or local problems has been criticized for being a conformist response to the expectations of the Western art system that favors art practices of that kind. Not only in Romania, but in all peripheral cultures, artists presenting ethnographic works on their local experience are frequently accused of self-exotization. From this perspective, the results of that sort of art exhibit a fake occupation on politicality and resume the ideological patronage of an external gaze.

Mircea Cantor's *Double Headed Matches* has been examined in that context.[19] At the outset of the project, Cantor planned to distribute boxes of specially designed double headed matches to passers-by on the streets of Brussels. The concept of the project was cleverly linked to the Duchampian problematization of authorship, pop-art conventions of commodity use, arte-povera's appeal to cheap material and presentational techniques of relational aesthetics. For production of the matches Cantor went to a factory based near Cluj. The factory managers told him that their machinery was not technically capable of producing the second head on the matches, but the workers in the factory would instead be able to do the job by hand for the agreed payment. This interesting procedure was filmed by Cantor and later displayed along with the initially planned performance. Later, however, during the last Venice Biennale, the project was re-presented only by the video material. The truly interesting local context of the match production somehow overshadowed Cantor's initial idea, which was not based on this social specificity but on a series of art-historical references. Can social engagement, willing or not, fall prey to other ideological agendas? Are we again over-contextualizing things? Can we insist on a radical positioning in terms of politicality without being manipulated by a 'foreign invention'? What is the audience for that sort of work? And to whom do we tell 'our stories'? Do these practices truly 'work' at home?

## Instead of a Conclusion

At the end of this paper which aimed to speculate on the problematic ground between national identity and social engagement, between interest in and distance to the social problems, and on the different critical registers in the process of identification, I would like to go back to the tattoo performance by Dan Perjovschi. In the *In den Schluchten des Balkan* exhibition, the artist received ten sessions of laser treatment in order to erase the tattoo from his left arm. If we remember the original intentions behind the first tattoo performance, we may perceive a symmetrical twist in methodology. It was aimed to be a symbolical repetition of the European branding of the people of a country with a single word. It had irony – it said one thing but meant the opposite. In the second instance, however, the irony disappears: the branding is this time denied straightforwardly – in an exhibition that could not completely escape the representational categorization of a geography.

Another interesting aspect of the laser treatment is the fact that it actually doesn't actually remove the pigment from the skin. Rather it dissolves and spreads it onto the texture of the skin. Thus, the word România can no longer be read as a whole, but it stays somewhere in the body; its political power in the body of its bearer is stripped away but is kept somewhere inside and aside. A perfect example of disidentification.

## NOTES

[1]    Such as *Beyond Belief, Contemporary Art from East Central Europe* organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago in 1995, *Aspects/Positions, 50 years of Art in Central Europe 1949-1999* by the Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien in 1999, and the seminal *After the Wall, Art and Culture in post-Communist Europe* by Moderna Museet in 1999; and the more related exhibition produced outside of Western Europe, *Bound/less Borders", first outdoor touring Balkan project 2002 / 2003* in Goethe Institute Inter Nationes Belgrade .

[2]    Another art event dedicated to Balkan geography in the year 2003 was organized by the Graz-based alternative and low-budget art space >rotor< under the rubric *Balkan Konsulat.* The series of exhibitions was dedicated to such Balkan cities as Belgrade, Sarajevo, Prague, Budapest, and Istanbul (the latter co-curated by myself). The minor-scale and the consistent interest of >rotor< in the region over eight years gives a certain credibility and sincerity to its approach to the region.

[3]    As expressed by Marina Gržinić in the panel discussion "The Balkan Hype – Why, why now and what comes next?" during the symposium *The Reinvention of the Balkans: Geopolitics, Art and Culture in South-East Europe* on the 25th of November 2003 in Kunsthalle Fridericianum Kassel.

[4]    Among other reviews, it is interesting to look at a text written by the artist, Dan Perjovschi (2003), who contributed to the last exhibition in that sequence.

[5]    For a seminal analysis, Foster 1996:171-204 and 212-18.

[6]    I am indebted for the 'thirding' concept of 'conversion' to Bogdan Ștefănescu.

[7]    Most effectively employed by the Slovenian industrial music band, Laibach.

[8]    Shkololli's piece was the main theme in the exhibition *Speculations* that I co-curated with Vasýf Kortun in Platform Contemporary Art Centre in Istanbul in 2002, and in my related article (2002).

[9]    For an example that illustrates the difficulty in translation a series of basic concepts of Western political philosophy to other social contexts, see Milevska (2003).

[10]    The first half of Danis Tanović's brilliant film *No Man's Land* (2001), for example, deconstructed the essentialist claims of ethnocultural nationalism in the Balkans quite successfully, whereas the second half produced an angry stereotyping of the French, the British and the German.

[11]    Dimitrijević and Anđelković (1999) make emphasize the distinction between the words shame and guilt while discussing Tanja Ostojić's piece, *Personal Space.*

[12]    Here I quote WG Sebald through Christian Schütze's article (2003). Referring to the long silence on German suffering from the World War II by the Germans, Sebald asked why "the sense of unparalleled national humiliation felt by millions in the last years of the war had never really found verbal expression,

and those directly affected by the experience neither shared it with each other nor passed it on to the next generation."

[13] A device also used by the Slovenian music group Laibach in linking various political signifiers to the Nazi ideology, as exemplified in the group's name – Laibach being the German word for the Slovenian capital Ljubljana.

[14] Similar to Milica Tomić's use of artists as extras in *XY Ungelöst* as the leading bearers of identification with the Other, Uroš Djurić proposes the art community (not as a whole, but specifically the ones who pursue a radical and experimental course of production) as the true agents of "the quest for progress and a better world'. In *Pioneers*, a series of photographs which depict various figures of the contemporary art scene in ex-socialist terrain wearing the red scarf of the Pioneers around their necks. The ceremony shared by all the participants in their childhood, is restaged in order to underline the artist's argument that they are "the real pioneers of today, since they truly fight for the principles to which they swore adherence when they were children."

[15] In an interview, echoing *Milica Tomić and Róza El-Hassan Driving in the Porsche and Thinking about the Overpopulation* in its appeal to a politics larger than the cultural difference, Djuriæ says "I don't feel like I belong to any peripheral country, but I belong to a poor country and if poverty means periphery than ok, I live in the suburbs" (Cristitch, 2002).

[16] I have taken the quotation from Ruxandra Balaci's text (2003). The exhibition mentioned here is *Traversées*, Musée d'Art de la Ville de Paris, 2001-02.

[17] Text for the catalogue of *In den Schluchten des Balkan*.

[18] It is useful here to juxtapose the works of some students of Josif Kiraly. The "Gara du Nord" (2000) co-produced by Stefan Cosma and Daniel Gontz portrays both the artist waiting on one of the platforms of the main train station. In the middle of the picture there is a visual complication, a mirror reflection to be recognized after paying more attention. Although the title locates the site, and the background cityscape and the sight within the reflection opens up the spatial dimensions of the composition, the focus of the picture is on the two figures. One of them is actually the one who takes the picture. They are looking at their own reflection and taking the picture of it. The inherent narcissism is enhanced by the self-confidence on their gestures and the implied homoeroticism. The photograph is called *Gara de Nord*, but there is no link between the figures and their environment. The site seems to be accidental. Another student of Kiraly, Ioana Nemeş also takes self-portraits, in which she holds the camera with an extended arm and photographs herself from a distance at some tourist sites. However, she is alone on her journey and thus must take the pictures of herself; she must objectify herself, and this produces a split between the figure in the picture and the person who touches the shutter. Sometimes we see her face, sometimes the back of her head as a stalker. A liminal experience of

subjectivity in a fragile balance of integrity – quite the opposite of Cosma & Gontz's photograph. The inherent psychological dimension also dominates her photograph entitled *Looking for Stability*. A clear blue winter sky, snowy fields, a tarmac road that is empty and a deflated basketball. Elaboration on the personal psyche also remains open to be linked to a larger context. Vlad Nanca, mentioned in the next paragraph of the main text was also a student of Kiraly.

[19] I am indebted here for the whole analysis on Cantor's piece to the Cluj based young critic Cosmin Costinaș.

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