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## ‘Art and Revolution’ – The Student Cultural Center in Belgrade as a Place between Affirmation and Critique

### The beginnings of the Student Cultural Center in Belgrade

In autumn 1971, the exhibition *Oktobarski salon* (October Salon) in Belgrade opened. It was an annual exhibition, taking place in the capital of Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia. It offered local artists a platform to show their recent works. By the same evening, only a few blocks away, a group of young graduates from the Academy of Fine Arts in Belgrade had moved into a new exhibition space, which was especially designated for them. It was part of the recently established *Studentski kulturni centar* (Student Cultural Center, SKC).<sup>1</sup> In this place, the artists set about opening an exhibition on their own. How did they contribute to this important opening night? They rearranged the exhibition space that the authorities had equipped with wooden panels, heavy velvet curtains and salon-like furniture. The group of artists was busy during the whole evening with transforming the place into what they considered as a proper working space.

The visitors who came over from October Salon to the Student Cultural Center were stunned. What they saw – or rather experienced – there, did not conform to their notion of art. There were no material objects exposed, or, at least, none that people were used to identify with a work of art. The only thing they could look at was a bunch of young guys removing furniture, breaking down panels, and laying the walls open as deep as to the brickwork. The action was considered by most of the visitors as a violent form of anti-art or non-art.

However, forty years later, Biljana Tomić presented this event as the first artwork that was realized at the SKC.<sup>2</sup> Biljana Tomić, who was running the SKC later for many years, participated in this action as well. Other main protagonists of this event were Marina Abramović, Era Milivojević, Neša Paripović, Zoran Popović, Raša Todosijević and Gergelj Urkom, six artists who were friends since their academy times.

We can understand this action firstly as a form of rebellion in the field of art and, secondly, as a manifestation of a new understanding of what art is supposed to be. It speaks of a new concept of art that stresses process and change rather than fixed and stable objects.

### Points of reference

Therefore, the protest of the artists was of twofold nature. It was based on aesthetic concerns as well as on institutional questions, whereas the two realms were intersected. These two aspects had also a common point of reference: it was the question how art is positioned within society and in how far society is relevant for art.

It does not come as a surprise that thinking about these questions and dealing with them in daily artistic practice had special importance in a socialist environment. At the same time though, these questions were also posed and dealt with in other parts of the world, for example in Western Europe or in the US-American context in different intensities over the course of time.<sup>3</sup> In Yugoslavia, as in all other places, the discussion about the relation between art and life went hand in hand with socio-political changes and situations. And here we find in Yugoslavia a pretty exceptional case of such a debate.

A lot has been written about the changes in cultural and artistic policies in Yugoslavia after World War II, where you can observe a development from an earlier ‘realist’ period (in the 1940s and early 1950s) to a later ‘modernist’ style. Most authors stress that the movement towards modernist art was motivated through the political detachment from Soviet Union and the following process of constructing a new political and cultural



Fig. 1 Mihailo Janković and Dušan Milenković, *Building of Social and Political Organizations*, New Belgrade, 1959-84.

identity.<sup>4</sup> Important features of this new identity were self-management in the economic sphere, and internationalism in the realm of foreign affairs.<sup>5</sup> On the level of real politics, the internationalist agenda led to the establishment of the Non-aligned movement (in Belgrade in 1961), i.e. the political cooperation of states that were neither part of NATO nor of the Warsaw Pact during the Cold War. However, internationalism was also implemented on the level of representation and was therefore a question of visual culture. In this sense, modernism was not a 'neutral' style, but served a specific goal for the construction of a new identity. This counts especially in the realm of architecture with its great contributions in housing and administration buildings. Vladimir Kulić shows how Yugoslav identity found an expression through the transformation of Western architecture by the example of the building of the League of Communists.<sup>6</sup> A glass façade (simulating a curtain wall) was laid over the massive concrete construction of the building. Thus, it

"emerged as a clear typological descendant of American corporate architecture. [...] A bit of technological inventiveness was sufficient to domesticate the alien representational content, as special lights built into the windows allowed the façades to spell ideological messages such as 'Long Live Tito'".<sup>7</sup> (fig. 1)

Modernism in Yugoslavia was thus based on a complex transfer. The language of corporate architecture of the capitalist West was used to mark the break

with Stalinism and the connectedness with the world. But this language was transferred to architecture of administration (in this case even combined with an ideological message). Taking into account as well the great efforts in housing construction, modernism in Yugoslavia spoke of progress in social and everyday life, whereas the same language in the West expressed economic power.<sup>8</sup>

For visual artists though, it was more important what happened in the realm of sculpture and painting. Modernism in sculpture took yet another shape and served different functions, which is especially evident in the field of monumental sculpture. Monuments that commemorated World War II on former battlefields and places of Nazi-massacres were numerous.<sup>9</sup> It is important to note that World War II was a partisan liberation war in Yugoslavia, which meant that partisans were fighting against German Nazis on the one hand and against Yugoslav royalists and collaborators with Fascism on the other. This added a civil war dimension to WW II in Yugoslavia, which affected the country to a great extent.<sup>10</sup> The half-abstract and half-figurative sculptures, whose shapes are often alluding to the forms of hands, flowers or wings, can be read as an attempt to create transcendence as well as reconciliation in 'brotherhood and unity.'<sup>11</sup> (fig. 2 and 3) And, of course, they were celebrating the victory over National Socialism and Fascism. (fig. 4) The shift between abstraction and figuration allowed the sculptures a great openness in the production of meaning, which was important for the monuments to ideally become places of inclusion.



Fig. 2 Bogdan Bogdanović, *Kameni cvet* (Stone Flower), 1966, Memorial complex Jasenovac.



Fig. 3 Miogrod Živković, *Spomenik pobjede na Sutjesci* (Monument of the victory of Sutjeska), 1963-71, Tjentište.



Fig. 4 Ivan Sabolić, *Tri pesnice* (Three Fists), 1960-64, reinforced concrete, Bubaň Memorial Park, Niš.

The case of painting is yet a different one. Here, the development from socialist realism to modernism is most visible. Ješa Denegri describes the process as one that was primarily initiated by the shifts in political circumstances, but was also strongly supported within the artistic community.<sup>12</sup> Miško Šuvaković analyzes the differences between certain discourses about art and the concrete (formal) solutions: In its utilitarian rhetoric, the canonized and academic socialist realism was bound to the revolution, the working class, and to the class struggle. But in the concrete painterly realization, it often modified into forms that alluded to moderate interwar modernism.<sup>13</sup> (fig. 5) According to Šuvaković, the exhibition *Sedamdeset slikarskih i vajarских dela iz perioda 1920-1940* (Seventy painterly and sculptural works from the period 1920-1940), held in the Galerija Ulus in 1951 played a very important role for the re-assessment of the modern tradition.

The pretty bureaucratic title of the exhibition stands in contrast with the euphoric rhetoric of certain critics who were speaking in favor of modernist art. Miodrag B. Protić wrote in a text, which was published 1955:

“[Socialist realism] ended in 1949 by means of democratization of the scientific, artistic and generally, cultural life. Pragmatic concepts and dogmatism were dismantled; given is a strong refuge to every constructive creative work. Thus, the freedom offered before is now assured.”<sup>14</sup>

The rhetoric of democratization and freedom was applicable to Yugoslavia thanks to the process of de-Stalinization and because of the above mentioned *internationalist claim*, which became part of Yugoslav politics and self-representation. It is comparable to the post-war situation in Western Europe: the (temporary) victory of abstraction over figuration, as Hans Belting put it, can legitimately be seen as a reverberation of the traumatic experience of dictated anti-modernism of National Socialism.<sup>15</sup> The same holds true to the USA, the soon to become leading power in politics as well as in visual arts: Abstract Expressionism was not a neutral style, but remained connected with ideology and rhetorics of freedom.<sup>16</sup>





Fig. 5 Milan Konjović, *Izgradnja mosta kod Bogojeva I* (Building of a Bridge at Bogojev I), 1947.

In Yugoslavia, the soon to be dominant branch of modernist painting was yet not abstract, but rather oriented to (historical) French art like impressionism, cubism and the art of Matisse or Chagall. (fig. 6, 7, and 8) Discursively, modernism was always bound to socialism, i.e. the Yugoslav *humanist* version of it. “The paths from art to life are thus complex, but inevitable, if we want socialism not to be only an economic and political category, but also a category of humanism and culture – a real socialism”, says the already quoted Protić.<sup>17</sup> The entanglement of different rhetorics finds its equivalent in the term *socialist modernism*, which was later renamed by its critics into *socialist aestheticism*.

One of these critics of *socialist aestheticism* was Lazar Trifunović who on the other side was promoting *informel* movement in Yugoslavia. He analyzed *socialist aestheticism* from a sociological point of view. For him, it was mainly dealing with laws of form and pictorial problems – in a metamorphosed aesthetics of the *intimism* of the 1930s – and therefore appealing to the taste of a new bourgeois class.<sup>18</sup> To the fact that such a class in Yugoslavia existed, Šuvaković makes a following statement:

“In Serbia and Yugoslavia, during the post-revolutionary phase, it came to the formation of a new technocratic and bureaucratic political, cultural and artistic elite, which started to replace the revolutionary elite [...]. The new ‘middle class’ of bureaucrats and technocrats was seek-



Fig. 6 Zora Petrović, *Odmor* (Repose), 1954.

ing its identifications and aesthetic references within modern artistic production.”<sup>19</sup>

Trifunović goes on saying that socialist aestheticism also depicted an image of a happy and unified society, which fitted well into its politically projected image. And all the before mentioned authors agree that *socialist modernism* at the peak of its social acceptance, when it started to transform into aestheticism, became “neutral and passive in relation to its surrounding reality”.<sup>20</sup> Yugoslavian cultural scene was not organized along the line of official/non-official art. But *socialist modernism* was the most cherished artistic style, and its supporters run the official institutions. Still in 1971, when the Student Cultural Center was founded, the October Salon promoted mainly those artists, as the exhibition catalogue clearly shows.<sup>21</sup>

This does not mean that there were no alternative artistic concepts. Trifunović saw in *informel* an artistic movement that through demolition of form was also negating external reality and has to be seen as politically engaged art practice.<sup>22</sup> (fig. 9) Denegri, on the other hand, points to artistic movements that at the same time (since middle of the 1950s) were choosing other cultural models and different precedes-



sors, like the Exat group, whose members were working in an abstract mode, connecting themselves to the “revolutionary traditions of post-October avant-garde and the legacy of the Bauhaus and Dutch De Stijl”.<sup>23</sup> (fig. 10) Others, however, like Leonid Šejka and the Mediala group, pushed the boundaries of painting in direction of object-based or even action-based work (fig. 11).

A parallel thread to this art historical narrative is the question of the autonomy of art, or, broader, the interrelation between art and society. Šuvaković’s claim, that the identification of modernist art – be it abstract or not – with autonomy falls short, is certainly true. He reads autonomy in art as a political project, because there are certain social powers that decide to exclude the realms of life and production from art.<sup>24</sup> This means that art is always societal, even if it is made in a certain style, which is – because of the ‘neutrality’ of its content – associated with autonomy. The following parts of this essay will further make these questions more complex, as they will be related to the artistic concepts and institutional circumstances of the subsequent generation.



Fig. 7 Ljubica Sokić, *Kompozicija sa stolom* (Composition with Chair), 1960.

## The New Notion of Art – Raša Todosijević

The generation in focus is a group of young artists working at the Student Cultural Center. The SKC was an institution that was given to the students in Belgrade after the protests in 1968. Students of the '68 generation were – as many other students around the globe – protesting against the political establishment and institutional deficiency at their universities.<sup>25</sup> June 1968 was an especially hot summer for the political leaders. They were accused of not implementing the socialist ideas and ideals consequently enough. The headword ‘red bourgeoisie’ was widespread among the students’ slogans. The leaders were also afraid that the protest could splash over to the factories and the workers – similar as in France – what could be prevented, though. The reaction to the student’s demands was both repression and concession.<sup>26</sup> The founding of student cultural centers at the universities belongs to the latter. The direction of the SKC in Belgrade was handed over to Petar Ignjatović, a former protest leader. It is possible to interpret this as an attempt of the authorities to institutionalize and canalize revolutionary energies.<sup>27</sup> Whatever the initial impulses to found the center looked like, later it was, as Jelena Vesić stresses, a self-organized institution without political leading and therefore heterogeneous:

“It was the lamination of leftist critical options – from French Maoism to Yugoslav humanistic Marxism, feminism, and anti-colonial struggles, dissidence and liberalism, mysticism and nationalism, with a touch of soft hippie and later also glam-punk subculture. What unified all these different policies was their critique of the official state structures, which ranged from the radical left to liberal turns and proto-nationalisms (which gradually prevailed and became the ‘official option’ during the 1990s).”<sup>28</sup>

After having finished an artistic training at the academy, Raša Todosijević and his colleagues took the chance to work in this cultural center, which firstly had a great deal of autonomy and secondly a budget, which enabled artists and curators to establish interna-



Fig. 8 Miodrag Protić, *Kompozicija I*, (Composition I), 1955.

tional contacts and exchange. This was quite exceptional for a socialist country. Nonetheless, they did not have much financial support and almost no backing on a symbolical level: their works were rather included in the collections or in the exhibitions of major art institutions. Collaboration and exchange mainly happened with similar student-run institutions in other Yugoslav cities and with artists from abroad. Artists and curators, therefore, operated on the margins of cultural life in Yugoslavia.<sup>29</sup> This difficult situation, the encapsulation, shaped the specific art production at the SKC.

The artists working at SKC were extremely dissatisfied with their academic education, because it mirrored the before shortly analyzed cultural paradigm of their country.<sup>30</sup> They opposed the notion of the only seemingly autonomous art, which they considered as, first, reified and, secondly, ideological. Their reaction was solely on the idea of process and change as well as on every day objects and actions. For this move, the ar-



Fig. 9 Bogdanka Poznanović, *Bez naziva* (Untitled), 1964.

tists had local and international predecessors, but the temporal, spatial or socio-political and cultural circumstances (Cold War, post-'68, non-aligned, etc.) were very specific. It was part of the behavior and activity of the artists, as the following analysis of a work by Raša Todosijević among other things is supposed to show.

It was a performance that took place on April 19, 1974 during a festival called *Aprilski Susret* (April Meeting) in the SKC. April Meetings took place every April between 1972 and 1978. From its very beginning, it was a whole-Yugoslav and internationally oriented festival, which featured performance art, theater, video, but also discussions, roundtables and other more research-oriented events.<sup>31</sup> Among the international guests was in 1974 Joseph Beuys who performed – as Ješa Denegri put it in a contemporary review – one of his 'characteristic lectures'.<sup>32</sup> Beuys was invited to the festival after Abramović, Popović, Todosijević and Urkom from SKC had met him during an art festival in Edinburgh the year before.

Raša Todosijević's performance carries the title *Pijenje vode – inverzije, imitacije i kontrasti* (Drinking water – Inversions, Imitations, and Contrasts). In this performance, there were three protagonists: Raša Todosijević, Marinela Koželj, and a fish. (fig. 12, 13,14) Documented by photos, its setting looked as follows: there are two tables next to each other, on one of them stands an aquarium, there is a white tablecloth on the second. Todosijević is sitting at the table and Marinela Koželj next to him. In the background, there are two banners with the following text:



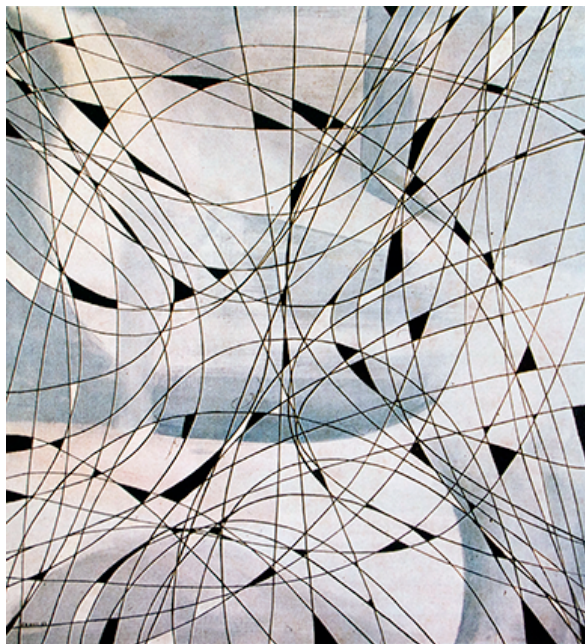


Fig. 10 Aleksandar Srnec, *Kompozicija U-P-14* (Composition U-P-14), 1953.



Fig. 11 Leonid Šejka, *Flaše: Proglašavanje objekta – Destrukcija flaše – Defunkcionalizovani objekt* (Bottles: Proclamation of the Object – Destruction of the Bottle – Defunctionalized Object), 1956 and 1957.

“PRESUMPTION ABOUT-ART, IMITATION, WATER, FISH, SILANCE [sic!], MEASURES” on the left and “DECISION AS ART, R. MUTT -1917 1974, DESINFECTATION, MARINELA, JOSEPHINE BEUYS, [TD RAŠA]”

on the right. The action consisted of the following: Todosijević took the fish out of the aquarium and threw it on the floor in front of the audience. For the rest of the performance the fish stayed out of the water. Todosijević then started to drink the water from the aquarium. The performance lasted in total 35 minutes, and during this time the artist drank 26 glasses of water. Due to the high quantity of water he was drinking, he had to throw up from time to time. Under the white tablecloth the artist had previously put purple pigment, which started to be wet and to dye the tablecloth. The performance was supposed to end as soon as the tablecloth would have been completely violet or when the carp had died.<sup>33</sup> But, in the end it was finished by the intervention of Joseph Beuys who interrupted the action by bringing the fish back into the aquarium.<sup>34</sup>

Todosijević’s performance was based on extreme tensions – or contrasts and inversions, as the title of the performance says. As the artist mentioned himself, the action took place on a cold April day in an almost unheated room. He performed bare-chested, whereas Marinela wore a warm coat. She seems passive and detached from the struggles that are taking place next to her. It is on the side of the fish a struggle for life. The water, which the fish is lacking, is the element of struggle for the artist. Through this strong tension – too much versus too little of water – Beuys had spontaneously broken. He obviously was not up for witnessing an act of torture. This points to another element: the tension between the action of the artist, the calmness of Marinela and the (probable) inner turmoil of the audience that does not dare to actively participate, i.e. to intervene into the work of art.

It is also important that Todosijević added to the action a layer that points beyond the physical action in real time into the symbolic sphere, which stabilizes and orders the chaos of the real which is happening in the performance. These are the textual elements that connected the action with certain abstract expressions and art historical references. Some of the expressions stay in a tautological relationship with the action, like the words ‘fish’ or ‘water’ whereas the other ones open the horizon and give some hints to the eventual concept of the work and of Todosijević’s art production of that time.



## Marcel Duchamp – Joseph Beuys – Raša Todosijević

What is – among other things – interesting, is the genealogy Todosijević presents in the work. He has two points in art history he refers to. The first is Marcel Duchamp and his famous readymade *Fountain*, which he submitted in 1917 with the signature “R. Mutt” as his contribution to the show of the Society of Independent Artists in New York. The second is Joseph Beuys. In changing Beuys’s first name into Josephine, Todosijević made a connection between Duchamp and Beuys, since he refers to the habit of Duchamp to use a female name, Rose Sélavy, as one of his pseudonyms.



Fig. 12 Raša Todosijević, *Pijenje vode – inverzije, imitacije i kontrasti* (Drinking of Water – Inversions, Imitations and Contrasts), 1974, performance together with Marinela Koželj, Students Cultural Center Belgrade.

The references to Duchamp and to Beuys are significant. Duchamp, especially his readymades became extremely important in art since the 1950s and especially in conceptual art since the 1960s, because artists discovered in him a pioneer of several important features of art. Their interests include the dethroning of the artist’s subject, the fusion of different media as well as the fusion of art and life in the use of mass-produced everyday objects in the realm of art. Duchamp dismissed the art of painting as a form of ‘retinal’ art, as he called it. For many artists, including Raša Todosijević, painting embodied the paradigm of bourgeois art production that put forth a problematic *l’art pour l’art* approach. And it also stood for a certain notion of the artist, who expresses his subjectivity with

paint on the canvas.<sup>35</sup> Todosijević’s performance is – among other things – also readable as an ironical comment to such a notion of the painter’s subject, a notion that at this time in Yugoslavia was still valuable and widely accepted. As the performer was puking on the white tablecloth and thus dying it, this can be seen as a fierce deconstruction of the ‘externalization of the subject’ in the act of painting.

Another important characteristic of the Duchampian readymade was that it exposed and therefore dealt with the commodity status of the artwork in the bourgeois society. This feature was of great importance for artists working in the period between 1950 and 1980, especially for the ones engaged in ephemere art practices and language-based conceptual art.<sup>36</sup> But for



Fig. 13 Raša Todosijević, *Pijenje vode – inverzije, imitacije i kontrasti* (Drinking of Water – Inversions, Imitations and Contrasts), 1974, performance together with Marinela Koželj, Students Cultural Center Belgrade.

the circle at the SKC the reference to Duchamp was less natural then for US-American artists for example, because Duchamp didn’t play any role in exhibitions or art criticism in Yugoslavia.<sup>37</sup> This neglect of an artist that became one of the crucial figures in 20<sup>th</sup> century’s art history was rooted in the early communist misunderstanding of the Avant-garde practices like Dada or Surrealism as completely detached from social concerns. Interestingly enough, the perception of the Avant-garde art did not change fundamentally after Yugoslavia dismissed the realist concept. It is therefore a genuine effort of artists like Todosijević to create their own genealogy, outside of the official paradigm.

Duchamp was also an important artist for Joseph Beuys. But like for most of the artists, Duchamp was

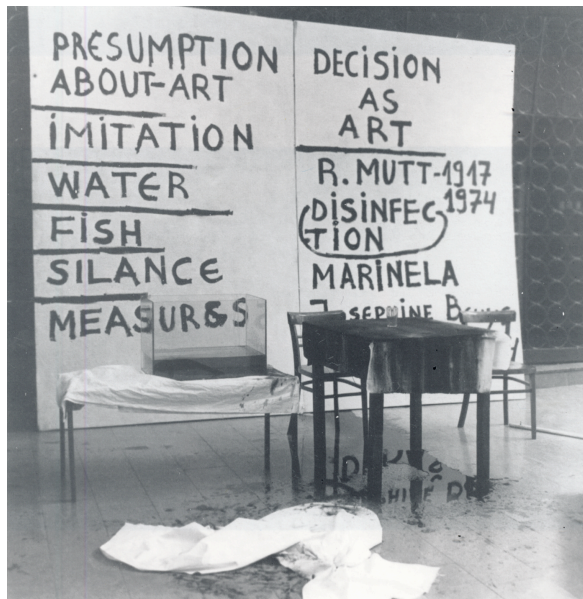


Fig. 14 Raša Todosijević, *Pijenje vode – inverzije, imitacije i kontrasti* (Drinking of Water – Inversions, Imitations, and Contrasts), 1974, performance together with Marinela Koželj, Students Cultural Center Belgrade.

a point of reference and a point of departure at the same time. Beuys was critical towards Duchamp and as it was pointed out often enough to, he went in a quite different direction in his art. Rather than stressing the analytical and philosophical potential in art, Beuys was interested in narration and – as Harald Szeemann put it – in his “individual mythology”.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, Beuys did not avoid (but, in fact, sometimes even fostered) a symbolical reading of his works. Especially in some of the more trivial interpretations of his works, the objects and materials he used were simply identified with abstract terms like ‘warmth’ or ‘coldness’ and so on. At the same time, Beuys himself formulated a critique of Duchamp, for example in his action in a TV show in 1964 that was entitled “Das Schweigen von Marcel Duchamp wird überbewertet” (“The silence of Marcel Duchamp is overrated”). He criticized Duchamp’s sense for enigmatic works and interpretative openness, which he considered an important factor for Duchamp’s outstanding position amongst the important critics.<sup>39</sup>

The word ‘silence’ on Todosijević’s poster can be read as a reference to Beuys’ comment on Duchamp and is a further link between the two of them. The crucial point is now how Raša Todosijević puts himself inside of a certain genealogy. Interpreting a short de-

scription of the performance by the artist, we could describe the relationship of Todosijević and the two older artists as a dialectical one.

“I began and completed the work with a series of inversions and fundamental contrasts, and it was an artificial, intellectually organized demonstration of my ideas. Not a single element, color, relation, organism condition or mental sensations in my work, has a descriptive, symbolic, metaphorical or ritual character by itself. The physical reality of the fish I left on dry and its breathing is equalizing with my conscious and forcible swallowing of water. I have not had the intention to describe a state of facts or some nature relation, but – by means of thought-out inversion or simple act – to show and therefore define the artistic gesture, which is art.”<sup>40</sup>

What is important about this text is that Todosijević stresses that his work is not to be understood in a symbolical manner. A lot of people took it for granted that the fish, the Christian symbol *par excellence* must have a symbolic meaning in the performance. Only a text by the artist can be an attempt to suppress such a reading. Whereas Duchamp with his readymades completely dismissed the concept of the symbol, Todosijević is playing with them, but without actually charging them with any meaning. Instead, in the text he stresses the act and the artistic gesture as his only values. He refers directly to Duchamp in the use of the expression ‘decision’, which for the concept of the readymade was a crucial term. The readymade rests on the act of decision and the declaration by the artist. On the other hand, Todosijević shares with Beuys the much more sensual approach to art, which also strongly addresses and includes themythmaking\_final audience. As Kristine Stiles observes, the performance lives from a subject to subject encounter rather than from a unidirectional subject to object relation.<sup>41</sup> Both in Beuys’ and in Todosijević’s work this relation is important. Yet, on the other hand, it is important to note that Beuys almost forced the fusion of art and life. He went so far that some of his actions are not clearly classifiable either as art or as political act. In this respect, Todosijević’s work functions in a totally different way.

## Art and Revolution

One cannot say that Todosijević's art is detached from life, but he has still a very different notion of how the relation between art and life should look like. In order to explain this I would like to point to another text of the artist entitled *Art and Revolution*, written in 1975 on the occasion of a project called *Oktober 75* (October 75). October manifestations took place in the SKC as a reaction to the mentioned October Salon and were – as Jelena Vesić stresses – less internationally and more locally oriented than the April meetings, reflecting – as for example 1975 – on the conditions for artistic production in the context of self-management.<sup>42</sup> One of the results of *Oktober 75* was a collection of texts by artists and curators where they were reflecting on the relation between art and society. Todosijević wrote as follows:

“Art, just like philosophy, is critical by definition. [...] Complex engagement of art is developing through an internal critique of linguistic procedures, and not on the level of an external presentation of fixed values. The steady wish of art for full autonomy is nothing else than its striving to reach self-conscious and efficient functioning within its own language, and also dignity in society. [...] There is only one possible unification of art and active political engagement: It is REVOLUTIONARITY IN THE DOMAIN OF THE LANGUAGE OF ART AS EXPRESSION OF DIALECTICAL VALUES. Art as an intellectual act permanently stresses its own dialectics, and, therefore gives up every formal evolution. [...] The strategy of Protest Art is loose only for one reason: it is using the same ready language that as such is valid on the scale of political values, against which it is protesting. [...] It is only when functioning as a critique and self-analysis of its own language that art is able to raise the issue of analysis and critique of social practice and demanding its change. Whether we are speaking about poster realism, pop art, minimal art, abstract expressionism, land art, conceptual art, elementary art and so on: if any of the mentioned

artistic systems in the process of formation exclude themselves from dialectical mechanism of self-analysis and self-critique, they are trained to stay in the service of conserving the social relations.”<sup>43</sup>

Other than the title suggests, this text is not about artists who are taking to the streets to shout their social and political demands. Neither it is about performances and actions that should bear a political message and address as much people as possible. To be short, the text does not refer to any kind of activism in art. Todosijević takes a stance that could be informed by Adorno's notion of politics and art. With Adorno he shares the idea that art is never dispensed from society.<sup>44</sup> Yet the core of its criticality is autonomy. Autonomy means to take a counter-position to society. This does not happen on the level of content, but on the level of structure. Autonomy in this sense is not to be mixed up with the idea of *l'art-pour-l'art*. For both Adorno and Todosijević, art is truly autonomous only if it respects its own language. For Todosijević this can be only achieved through a process of self-reflection that must never come to an end. And in this sense it would be revolutionary and not a series of artistic styles. But, as Adorno dialectically would criticize: distanced and thus autonomous art lets society on the other hand undisturbed. It is process of negative dialectics that reveals within autonomy an affirmative aspect. In this ambivalence therefore, also lies the affirmative aspect of the art production of most of the artists at SKC.

Raša Todosijević was interested in art *about* art (but not in art for art's sake). And the SKC offered a space where exactly the search for such an art was possible. Therefore, the mentioned initial happening at the SKC, taking place as a parallel event to the October Salon is telling, because it shows that the activities at the SKC exactly started with decomposing or, rather, redefining the idea of the artwork. The same counts for the idea of the author subject, who is less 'dead' (Roland Barthes) then materially present and exposed. In this sense the artist is fragile. And, as the action shows, it led to the introduction of artistic collaboration that was of great importance for the SKC during the seventies.



(Also in the moments of individual production, since the programming of the activities was most often a collective endeavor.)

Todosijević performing *Pijenje vode* is such an ambiguous author figure, too. On the first sight he seems to be the master, being the only active participant of the event. He is acting heroic – but his struggle is pointless and self-imposed. He is struggling with himself, trying to equalize his swallowing of water with the breathing on the fish. As a subject in the performance he partly gives control over to his own body. The end of the work is not determined by himself, but by the life or death of the fish, or by the act of dying the tablecloth through the reaction of his stomach. Sovereignty becomes as fragile and questionable as the idea of completion of the work of art. Todosijević's performance is not only in this respect bound to live, as a reflection of human life in the post-metaphysical area. Branislav Dimitrijević is right when saying that Todosijević is not at all trying to comfort the beholders or to embed his works into humanistic pathos. He rather exacerbates the unease people might have towards live.<sup>45</sup> In this sense, through the language of art, they are conjoint with society. The performance *Pijenje vode* obtains its impact not so much through the interpretation of the mistreatment of the fish as an act of torture, but more because of the general tension or the *contrasts* and *inversions* he builds up. The work on one level elaborates on aesthetic concerns, trying to find a new artistic language. Todosijević reflects this aesthetic dimension through the art historical genealogy. (Putting himself into a line with Duchamp and Beuys is at the same time a statement against the cultural politics in his country.) Furthermore, his artistic language, based on artistic gesture, connects itself to the 'world out there'. For, the artistic language is meant to be a tool to communicate with the world – but as the artist clearly states in his manifesto, not in the commonly used language. The art space of SKC is thus used to have of lab that offers the necessary autonomy or encapsulation from the world and the way of speaking there. This is not to mix up with detachment, because the conflicts, tensions and struggles of the world find their sublimated and concentrated resonance in the performance.

## Endnotes

1. The building, which was handed over to the students, was the recently renovated building of State Security. Cf. Jelena Vesić, *SKC (Student Cultural Centre) as a Site of Performative (Self-)Production. October 75 – Institution, Self-organization, First-Person Speech, Collectivization*, in: *Život umjetnosti*, no. 91, 2012, p. 30-53, esp. p. 46.
2. Biljana Tomić in an interview with the author on September 5, 2012 in Belgrade.
3. Cf. Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde*, Frankfurt 1974; Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art. Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, translated from French by Arthur Goldhammer, Chicago 1983. Bürger's book develops a theory that is mainly concerned with the relation between art and society, whereas Guilbaut gives insight into a concrete historical situation. He refers to the discussions of American artists during the 1930s, most of them connected or sympathizing with communism, whether art should be free of any formal and contentual constraints or not. The two mentioned books are only two influential and interesting examples of a range of texts that is far too wide to be referred here. The only aspect I would like to add is that art history as a discipline has also great representatives of a 'social history of art,' as for example T.J. Clark, who approaches art methodologically as something that is informed by life and at the same time informs it.
4. Cf. Dunja Blažević, *Who's That Singing over there? Art in Yugoslavia and after... 1949-1989*, in: *Aspects/Positions, 50 Years of Art in Central Europe 1949-1999*, ed. Lóránd Hegyi, Vienna 1999, p. 81-96; Nevenka Stanković, *The case of Exploited Modernism. How Yugoslav Communists used the Idea of Modern Art to Promote Political Agendas*, in: *Third Text*, vol. 20, 2006, p. 151-159; WHW, Vojin Bakić, in: *Political Practices of (post-)Yugoslav Art. Retrospective 01*, eds. Zorana Dojić and Jelena Vesić, Belgrade 2010, p. 52-63. The most important and comprehensive contribution to this topic is the recently published second volume of the History of Art in Serbia of the 20th century edited by Miško Suvaković with its debate on the various modernisms: *Istorija umetnosti u Srbiji XX vek. Tom 2: Realizmi i modernizmi oko hladnog rata* [History of Art in Serbia in the 20th century, Vol. 2: Realisms and Modernisms around Cold War], ed. Miško Suvaković, Belgrade 2012.
5. Self-management in Yugoslavia was based on the idea of a bottom-up structure in companies and institutions. Workers' councils elected management and experts of their firms. Self-management was a huge economic reform with the purpose to foster the "withering away of the state" (Marx). It started to be implemented in the early 1950s as a reaction to the break with the Soviet Union. Compared with Soviet socialism and capitalism, it was considered to be a 'third way', because it introduced the worker as manager and the third category of societal property. People were encouraged through self-management to form 'interest collectives' also in realms outside of economy, for example concerning social and cultural life. (I would like to thank Dubravka Sekulić for her explanations). Cf. Branko Horvat and Vlado Rašćević, *Workers Management in Yugoslavia. A Comment*, ed. Yugoslav Institute of Economic Research, Belgrade 1959, p. 195-198.
6. I would like to thank Dubravka Sekulić for her remark.
7. Maroje Mrduljaš and Vladimir Kulić, *Modernism in between. The Mediatory Architectures of Socialist Yugoslavia*, Berlin 2012, p. 40. See also: *Unfinished Modernisations. Between Utopia and Pragmatism. Architecture and Urban Planning in the Former Yugoslavia and the Successor States*, eds. Maroje Mrduljaš and Vladimir Kulić, Zagreb 2012.
8. I would like to thank Philip Ursprung for his remarks.
9. Cf. Robert Burghardt and Gal Kirn, *Yugoslav Partisan Memorials. The Aesthetic Form of the Revolution as Form of Unfinished Modernism*, in: *Unfinished Modernisations*, eds. Mrduljaš and Kulić 2012, p. 84-95.
10. Cf. Slavko Goldstein, *Der Zweite Weltkrieg*, in: *Der Jugoslawienkrieg. Handbuch zu Vorgeschichte, Verlauf und Konsequenzen*, ed. Dunja Melčić, Wiesbaden 2007, p. 170-200.
11. Bojana Pejić suggests another reading of the language of the official monuments. According to her, their abstract forms expressed the 'rhetorics of power', for they were drawing military emblems. Cf. Bojana Pejić, *Socialist Modernism and the Aftermath*, in: *Aspects/Positions*, ed. Hegyi 1999, p. 115-124, here: p. 117.
12. Ješa Denegri, *Inside or Outside 'Socialist Modernism'? Radical Views on the Yugoslav Art Scene, 1950-1970*, in: *Impossible Histories*, eds. Đurić and Suvaković 2003, p. 170-208.
13. Miško Suvaković, *Fenomenologija i retorika socijalističkog modernizma* [Phenomenology and Rhetoric of Socialist Modernism], in: *Istorija umetnosti u Srbiji XX vek*, ed. Suvaković 2012, p. 401-420, p. 403.
14. Miodrag B. Protić, *Geneza srpske savremene umetnosti (skica)* [The Formation of Serbian Contemporary Art (Draft)], in: *Savremenici / likovne kritike i eseji* [Contemporaries / Art Criticisms and Essays], Belgrade 1955, p. 36, quoted after Suvaković 2012, *Fenomenologija i retorika socijalističkog modernizma*, p. 405: "Ova faza (napomena M.S.: misli se na socijalistički realizam) okončana je krajem 1949. godine demokratizacijom naučnog, umetničkog, kulturnog života uopšte. Osuđena su pragmatičarska shvatanja i dogmatizam; dato je snažno utičište svakom konstruktiv-

- nom stvaralaštvu. Time je, ranije pružena sloboda, sada obezbeđena." (translation into English S.R.).
15. Hans Belting, *Bilderstreit. Ein Streit um die Moderne*, in: *Bilderstreit. Widerspruch, Einheit und Fragment in der Kunst seit 1960*, eds. Siegfried Gohr and Johannes Gachnang, Cologne 1989, p. 15-28, esp. p. 16.
  16. Cf. Guilbaut 1983, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*.
  17. Miodrag B. Protić, *Od umetnosti do života*, in: *Umetnost*, Nr. 1, 1965, pp. 5-19, p. 10: "Putevi od umetnosti do života su dakle složeni, ali nezaobilazni ukoliko želimo da socijalizam ne bude samo ekonomska i politička kategorija, već i kategorija humanizma i kulture – pravi socijalizam." (translation into English S.R.).
  18. Denegri 2003, *Inside or Outside 'Socialist Modernism'?*, p. 176.
  19. Suvaković 2012, *Fenomenologija i retorika socijalističkog modernizma*, p. 408: „U Srbiji i Jugoslaviji je u postrevolucionarnom periodu došlo do stvaranja nove tehnokratizovane i birokratizovane političke, kulturalne i umetničke elite koja je započela da zamenjuje revolucionarnu elitu u prostoru pragmatičnog i instrumentalnog svakodnevnog delovanja. Nova 'srednja klasa' birokrata i tehnokrata tražila je svoje identifikacione i estetske reference u modernoj umetničkoj produkciji." (translation into English S.R.).
  20. Denegri 2003, *Inside or Outside 'Socialist Modernism'?*, p. 176.
  21. Dvanaesti Oktobarski salon likovnih i primenjenih umetnosti Srbije [12th October Salon of Visual and Applied Art of Serbia], ed. Cultural Center, Belgrade 1971.
  22. Ješa Denegri 2003, *Inside or Outside 'Socialist Modernism'?*, p. 197.
  23. Ibidem, p. 182-183.
  24. Miško Suvaković, *Uvod* [Introduction], in: *Istorija umetnosti u Srbiji XX vek*, ed. Suvaković 2012, p. 33-37, 34.
  25. A very profound analysis of the 1968 movement and student protests in Belgrade gives Boris Kanzleiter, *Die 'Rote Universität'. Studentenbewegung und Linksoption in Belgrad 1964-1975*, Hamburg 2011.
  26. Cf. ibidem, p. 291-292.
  27. Following the research of Jelena Vesić, there are mainly two contradictory interpretations of the state of independency or political control of the SKC. "[...] whereas for some it was the state mechanism of control that turned SKC into an 'organized margin' or a 'peripheral social lab' in which critical ideas and practices could be easily identified, isolated, and controlled, for others it meant 'conquering and producing a space of genuine freedom,' which made room for a different artistic expression and a free circulation of critical ideas coming from the new generation of (conceptual) artists from all over the world." – Vesić 2012, *SKC as a Site of Performative (Self-)Production*, p. 31.
  28. Ibidem.
  29. Cf. Dejan Sretenović, Raša Todosijević. *Was ist Kunst? Art as Social Practice*, Belgrade 2001 p. 25.
  30. Cf. Branislav Dimitrijević, *Danke, Raša Todosijević! Zur Retrospektive von Raša Todosijević im Museum für zeitgenössische Kunst (MOCA) in Belgrad*, in: *Springerin*, vol. 8, No. 4, 2002, p. 50-53, esp. p. 52.
  31. The program is published on the web-archive of the Student Cultural Center: <http://www.arhivaskc.org.rs/> (June 16, 2013).
  32. Ješa Denegri, *Mogućnosti proširenih medija. Povodom III aprilski susreta* [Possibilities of Expanded Media. On Occasion of III April Meeting], in: *Umetnost*, no. 39, 1974, p. 20-29, p. 22.
  33. Following the description the artist gave himself in a contemporary text the performance was supposed to end when the tablecloth was dyed. Cf. Sretenović 2001, Raša Todosijević, p. 59. According to the present memories of the artist, either the death of the carp should have ended the performance or the completed dying of the tablecloth. (Todosijević in an interview with the author on May 17, 2012 in Belgrade.)
  34. This is the recollection of the artist in an interview with the author on May 17, 2012 in Belgrade.
  35. It is a way of approaching abstract expressionist painting for which Harold Rosenberg can be exemplary quoted. Cf. Harold Rosenberg, *The American Action Painters*, in: idem, *The Tradition of the New*, New York 1994 (1952), p. 23-39.
  36. As Amelia Jones showed, this is of course only one possible reading of Duchamp. According to Jones, it was mainly the American critique that analyzed Duchamp in relation to the readymade and the implicit institutional critique, whereas the French theory was much more interested in the sexualized author function. Cf. Amelia Jones, *Postmodernism and the En-Gendering of Marcel Duchamp*, Cambridge, MA 1994, p. xvi.
  37. According to a very useful book by Ješa Denegri, in which all exhibitions of international art in Belgrade between 1965 and 2006 are represented, Marcel Duchamp's work was exhibited for the first time in 1983 in the Museum of Contemporary Art. Cf. Ješa Denegri, *Jedna moguća istorija moderne umetnosti. Beograd kao internacionalna umetnička scena 1965-2006* [One Possible History of Modern Art. Belgrade as International Art Scene 1965-2006], Belgrade 2009, p. 621.
  38. Harald Szeemann, *Individuelle Mythologien*, Berlin 1985.
  39. Cf. Uwe M. Schneede, *Joseph Beuys. Die Aktionen. Kommentiertes Werkverzeichnis mit fotografischer Dokumentation*, Ostfildern-Ruit 1994, p. 80-83.
  40. Sretenović 2001, Raša Todosijević, p. 59.

41. Kristine Stiles, *Performance*, in: *Critical Terms for Art History*, eds. Richard Shiff and Robert S. Nelson, Chicago / London 2003, p. 75-97, esp. p. 75.
42. Vesić 2012, *SKC as a Site of Performative (Self-)Production*, p. 46.
43. Quoted after a retyped copy from the (lost) original brochure from the SKC archive. Raša Todosijević, *Umetnost i revolucija*, in: *Oktobar 75*, Belgrade 1975, p. 1-8, (separate pagination for every text).
44. Theodor W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften. Ästhetische Theorie*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, Frankfurt 2003, p. 334-387.
45. Branislav Dimitrijević 2002, *Danke, Raša Todosijević!*, p. 50-53.

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## Summary

The paper presents a close reading of the performance “Drinking of Art” from 1974 by the Yugoslav artist Raša Todosijević as well as insight in the artist’s thoughts about the connection between art and society, which he formulated in the text “Art and Revolution” in 1975. Both performance and text enable to understand what was at stake in the art production of the time at the Student Cultural Center (SKC) in Belgrade, a leading place of performance art in the 1970s, where Todosijević was working. The first part of the paper delivers a short introduction into the cultural and social context, in order to understand Todosijević’s work better, i.e. to explain from what he dissociated and into which genealogies he was inscribing himself on the other hand. The analysis of his performance “Drinking of Water” in the following parts of the essay shows that this was mainly the art of Marcel Duchamp and Joseph Beuys. The broader question for the artist, though, was how art relates to and behaves within society. The paper analyses the different forms and meanings of artistic autonomy, especially in relation to the specific position of the SKC as part and critical counterpart of the cultural (and political) life in Yugoslavia.

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## Title

Seraina Renz, ‘*Art and Revolution*’ – *The Student Cultural Center in Belgrade as a Place between Affirmation and Critique*, in: *Mythmaking Eastern Europe: Art in Response*, ed. by Mateusz Kapustka, in: *kunsttexte.de/ostblick*, Nr. 3, 2014 (13 pages), [www.kunsttexte.de/ostblick](http://www.kunsttexte.de/ostblick).